The New Criterion

October 2003

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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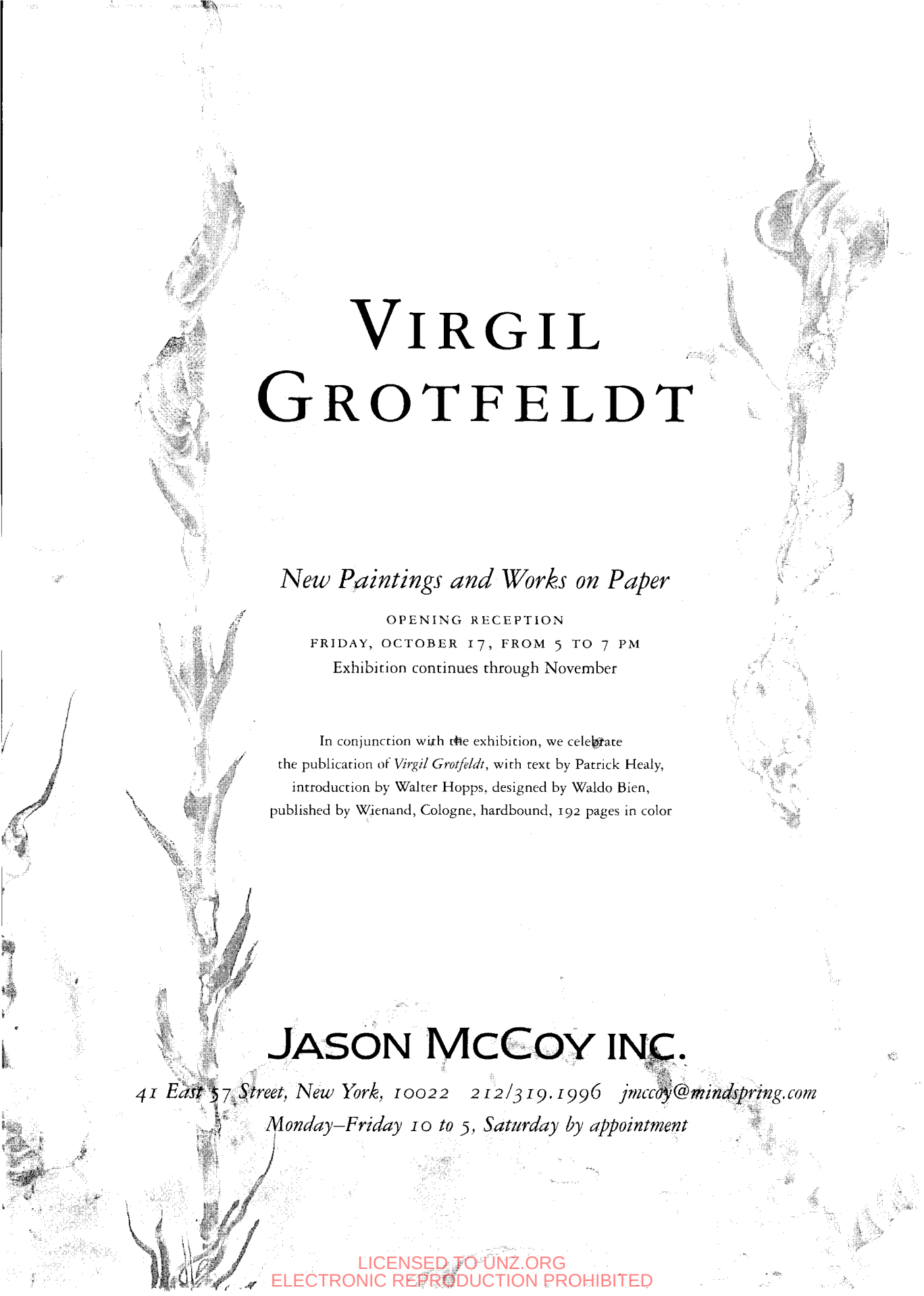

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Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
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Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen's latest book is *Twentieth-Century Attitudes* (Ivan R. Dee).

James Bowman is a resident scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

F. H. Buckley's most recent book is *The Morality of Laughter* (Michigan).

Anthony Daniels is a doctor and writer whose most recent books are *Utopias Elsewhere* and *Monrovia Mon Amour*.

Paul Dean is Head of English at Dragon School, Oxford.

Charles Edward Eaton's *Work of the Sun: New and Selected Poems 1991–2002* is forthcoming in January from Cornwall Books.

James Gardner is art critic of the *New York Post* and architecture critic of *The New York Sun*.

Debora Greger's most recent book of poetry, *God*, was published in 2001. Her new collection, *Western Art*, will appear next year.

Jeffrey Meyers has published four books on Orwell, including a biography, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation* (2000). His life of Somerset Maugham will appear in February.

Jay Nordlinger is the managing editor and music critic of *National Review*.

Jean-François Revel is the author of several best sellers, including *Without Marx or Jesus* and *How Democracies Perish*. He lives in Paris.

Stephen Schwartz's *Two Faces of Islam* is now available in paperback from Anchor Books.

John Simon's latest book is *Dreamers of Dreams: Essays on Poets and Poetry* (Ivan R. Dee).

David R. Slavitt's latest book is *Aspects of the Novel: A Novel* published by Catbird Press.

Mark Steyn is the senior North American correspondent for Britain's Telegraph Group.

Renee Winegarten is the author of *Accursed Politics: Some French Women Writers and Political Life 1715–1850* (Ivan R. Dee).

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Notes & Comments: October 2003

O Canada?

"Humor" is not a word that leaps to mind when we think of the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail*. "Ponderous," perhaps; "instinct with liberal clichés," undoubtedly; but *funny*? We didn't think it was possible, either. But we were wrong. The venerable Canadian paper has just introduced an hilarious new column. Although written by an American, it reads like the genuine Yukon product that it is. The first—possibly the only—installment appeared on September 22 under the title "Can We Democrats Be Your Next Province?" Written by Paul Lewis, a professor of English at Boston College, this verbal bijou is one of the most spectacular examples of parody we have read in—well, in a very long time.

When it comes to the rhetorical strains of smarmy, self-righteous liberalism, Professor Lewis has perfect pitch. Even his governing conceit is perfect. Like Pope in "The Rape of the Lock," he dilates on an absurdity in order to cast a clarifying light on moral pomposity. For Pope it was a lock of hair. For Professor Lewis it is the proposition that the "blue states"—those bits of America that, home to universities, Hollywood, and other engines of political deformation, voted for Al Gore in 2000—should secede and become part of Canada. It is a delicious thought, and Professor Lewis handles the spoof with consummate skill. "Having endured the outrages of the 2000 presidential 'election' and the 9/11-empowered Republicans' reactionary policies," he writes with comical dudgeon, "progressive Democrats, Greens and Independents across the United States are smouldering."

> In stunned disbelief, we have signed petitions, given money to progressive causes, and joined street protests. But arghhh! and aarghhh! again, many of us have had it. We're fed up and need to move on—or out. But where to go?
>
> A map of the state-by-state voting in 2000 suggests the obvious answer. . . . In the most peaceful and democratic way, without invoking images of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, these states need to secede from the Union, reform into provinces and join Canada.
>
> As soon as one considers the idea, the advantages become obvious. Citizens of the new Canadian provinces would enjoy basic entitlements and benefits unheard of in the U.S., including: universal health care; good and affordable colleges and universities; good mass transit in major cities; lower rates of violent crime and pollution; affordable prescription drugs; and enhanced respect for the civil rights of all people, including gays and lesbians.

What a sassy wit is Professor Lewis! Notice

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how cleverly he aims his barbs, how skillfully he has tailored his parody.

In the United States, there are people who might think that Professor Lewis was in earnest—that he actually meant what he said about "universal health care" in Canada and so on. But Professor Lewis was writing in a Canadian newspaper for denizens of that vast U.S. protectorate to the north, and he of course knew that *they* could be counted on the see the cruel irony of his words. "Universal health care," forsooth! A universal gurney on the hospital ward is more like it—unless you are lucky enough to hobble to the United States to get your appendix out, your hip replaced, your cataracts removed.

As for the rest of Professor Lewis's list, just think of how happy most Canadians are to be able to go to Dalhousie instead of Harvard, to McGill instead of Yale, to the University of Toronto instead of the University of California: what lucky creatures they are! And those entitlements! Professor Lewis must have known how it would sting when his readers absorbed his words and then looked at their tax bill and pondered the depredations of their nanny-state government. What about violence? Professor Lewis of course knows that violent crime is way down in American cities. Out on the great plains or the Pacific Northwest or the Vermont woods it's the same or lower than in Canada, and for the same reason: there is, statistically, nobody there. (Notice how coyly Professor Lewis keeps silent about Canada's status as a haven for terrorists: now there's a source of real violence.)

We suspect that Professor Lewis will soon be snapped up by some canny Republican politician as a speech writer. His talent for exposing the preposterousness of left-wing causes exceeds even that of *The New York Times*'s Paul Krugman, another master of the genre. What a potent weapon of ridicule he would be on the staff of some aspiring right-winger. Someone has suggested to us that we have Professor Lewis all wrong, that he actually *endorses* what he wrote in *The Globe and Mail*. We don't believe it for a minute. After all Professor Lewis is an adult. He teaches English in a well-regarded American college. Yet he writes with scabrous glee that

> We new Canadians will (shortly) acquire a national leader capable of producing coherent sentences in at least two languages. We will leave behind a U.S. composed of increasingly polluted semi-tropical and desert states inhabited by citizens hell-bent on posting the Ten Commandments in public washrooms, installing a Star Wars defence system around fast-food restaurants, and generally doing what they can to bring on the Apocalypse.

Only a moron, you say, could believe such tripe. We don't deny it. Which is why we are so sure that Professor will soon be embraced as a clever Republican strategist. We are grateful to *The Globe and Mail* for catapulting this prodigious talent to public notice.

A bake sale in Texas

This past June, the Supreme Court handed down a couple of decisions that were widely seen as lending aid and comfort to those who support the practice of "affirmative action," i.e., discrimination on the basis of race or some other token of alleged victimhood. At issue were two lawsuits challenging admissions policies at the University of Michigan. The decisions were mixed—the court ruled (by a margin of 5–4) in favor of letting stand the law school's policy of discriminating on the basis of race, while it partially reversed (6–3) a similar scheme in undergraduate admissions. Mixed or not, the university hailed the rulings as "a major victory." Quoth Mary Sue Coleman, the university's president:

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> This is a tremendous victory for the University of Michigan, for all of higher education, and for the hundreds of groups and individuals who supported us. A majority of the court has firmly endorsed the principle of diversity. . . . This is a resounding affirmation that will be heard across the land—from our college classrooms to our corporate boardrooms.

Whether the Supreme Court's endorsement of discrimination was a victory for anything other than the forces of political correctness may be doubted. But President Coleman was surely right that the Court's decisions "will be heard across the land." Even now, we imagine, squads of lawyers and ACLU activists are honing their grievances in preparation for another assault on the principles of color-blind justice and equality of opportunity.

But when, we wonder, will news of Mary Sue's "tremendous victory" reach Texas? The University of Michigan had a system whereby an applicant's race—provided it was the right race, i.e., not the white race—earned him 20 points out of a possible 150 points. (To put the 20 points in perspective, note that "an outstanding essay, leadership or personal achievement" garnered a mere 3 points each.) In late September, some enterprising students at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, endeavored to apply the Michigan principle to community fund-raising. According to a story carried by the Associated Press, a group called Young Conservatives of Texas—following the example of some students at other campuses—organized a bake sale in which cookies were priced according to the buyer's race or gender. White males could get their confections for a buck each, white women got the same thing for 75 cents. Hispanics did even better: they could get their cookies for only 50 cents a piece, while blacks were luckiest of all: for them, cookies were on sale for two bits a pop.

What if you were only part black? Or one-third Hispanic? Did Asians have to pay a surcharge?

We'll never know. Southern Methodist University promptly shut down the sale after only forty-five minutes because, the AP story reported, "it created a potentially unsafe situation." What, undercooked cookies? Salmonella in the baking pan? No, the threat was not biological but ideological—a condition the university apparently considers far more toxic. No sooner had the sale gotten under way than a black student filed a complaint charging that the sale was "offensive." More offensive than the racism of "affirmative action"?

According to Tim Moore, director of the SMU student center, shutting down the bake sale was "not an issue about free speech." Really? You might think it was *precisely* a matter of free speech; so might we. But for Mr. Moore, this effort on the part of conservative students to dramatize the absurdity of "affirmative action" was "really an issue where we had a hostile environment being created."

"A hostile environment?" *Puh-leeze.* A hostile environment is what you encounter in Antarctica, in the streets of Tikrit, or in university classrooms if you are imprudent enough to espouse conservative opinions. A bake sale with a sliding scale of prices doesn't create a hostile environment: it creates an *embarrassing* environment for politically correct academic administrators too squeamish to acknowledge their own hypocrisy. A racially or sexually determined scale of perquisites is just dandy when it comes to college admissions, academic advancement, employment at *The New York Times*, etc. A twenty-point bonus, redeemable—if you are black—at one of America's great universities: no problem! That's making education "more equitable" and "increasing diversity." But poke a bit of fun at this system of organized hypocrisy and you find you are creating a "hostile environment." It's enough to make one toss one's cookies.

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Lengthened shadows: II

Modernism & its institutions

by Hilton Kramer

I couldn't portray a woman in all her natural loveliness. I haven't the skill. No one has. I must, therefore, create a new sort of beauty, the beauty that appears to me in terms of volume, of line, of mass, of weight, and through that beauty interpret my subjective impression. Nature is a mere pretext for a decorative composition, plus sentiment. It suggests emotion, and I translate that emotion into art. I want to expose the Absolute, and not merely the factitious woman.
—Georges Braque, circa 1908

Subject, with her, is often incidental.
—Wallace Stevens,
on the poetry of Marianne Moore, 1935

Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's very tiny—very tiny, content.
—Willem de Kooning, 1963

Although we have lately been advised that "the days when one could sit down with an easy mind to write an account of something called modernism are over,"[1] there nonetheless remains very little in our experience of the arts even in this first decade of the twenty-first century that can be separated from the traditions that were established by what used to be called the modern movement but that nowadays tend to be known collectively as modernism. As I shall be using the term here—that is, modernism as a movement in literature as well as the visual arts—it was never monolithic in style, ideas, or impact. It encompassed a broad range of styles, from realism and symbolism to pure abstraction, and a variety of anti-styles we associate with the legacy of Marcel Duchamp and Dadaism.

In its heyday, which by my reckoning dates from the 1880s to the 1950s, it was as easily identified by the traditions it rejected as by the innovations it embraced. What it mainly rejected in the pictorial arts were the moribund conventions of nineteenth-century academic instruction, which had elevated a narrowly conceived mode of depicting the observable world to the status of an aesthetic and cultural absolute. What modernism rejected in architecture was ornament, decorative embellishments, and explicit references to historical precedent. As far as painting and sculpture are concerned, modernism introduced a radical revision in the very concept of representation, the implications of which are admirably summarized in George Heard Hamilton's introduction to his classic history, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1880–1940*:

> In the half-century between 1886, the date of the last Impressionist exhibition, and the beginning of the Second World War, a change took place in the theory and practice of art which was as radical and momentous as any

1 *Art in Its Time: Theories and Practice of Modern Aesthetics* by Paul Mattick (Routledge, 2003), page 9.

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> that had occurred in human history. It was based on the belief that works of art need not imitate or represent natural objects and events. Therefore artistic activity is not essentially concerned with representation but instead with the invention of objects variously expressive of human experience, objects whose structures as independent artistic entities cannot be evaluated in terms of their likeness, nor devalued because of their lack of likeness, to natural things.[2]

What was most conspicuously embraced by modernism in the literary arts were so-called free verse (*vers libre*) in poetry, which entailed an abandonment of traditional rhyme and meter, and the "stream of consciousness" technique in fiction, which was introduced to literature in English by James Joyce but was made more accessible to public comprehension by the popularization of Freudian psychoanalytical therapy. These innovations entailed a rejection of nineteenth-century narrative conventions in favor of more hermetic literary structures based on myth, symbolism, and other devices more commonly found in poetry, especially modern poetry, than in prose fiction.

Moreover, owing to the resolute and often vindictive resistance that such innovations met with in the arena of public taste, it was probably inevitable that ways would be sought to circumvent that resistance. It was, in any case, in direct response to such prohibitions that the modernist impulse was driven to create institutions of its own in order to safeguard the survival and prosperity of its aesthetic initiatives. It was probably inevitable, too, that in the early history of these institutions, an attempt would be made to minimize the sometimes controversial content of modernism—not only its sexual explicitness but its political provocations as well. After all, in a period when even as blameless a book of short stories as Joyce's *Dubliners* met with refusal by its first printers on the grounds that certain passages were deemed to employ improper language, and a masterpiece like *Ulysses* was legally banned in the United States, there was ample reason to be cautious about publicizing the content of certain modernist works.

On the large and thorny question of modernism's content and its relation to modernist form, however, it must also be said that certain modernists have themselves been complicit in minimizing its content even under conditions where prudence was no longer required, as the epigraphs quoted above from Georges Braque, Wallace Stevens, and Willem de Kooning suggest. For

What, then, were the institutions that were either created or commandeered to accommodate modernism's battle of the Absolutes?

anyone who was present on the New York art scene in 1953, for example, when de Kooning exhibited the first of his sensational *Women* paintings at the Sidney Janis Gallery, the much quoted claim made ten years earlier, obviously in reference to abstract painting, that the content in the creation of a work of art is "very tiny," would have sounded absurd. The ferocity with which de Kooning attacked his subject in the *Women* series left no one in doubt about the importance of its content—both for the artist and viewer—and the unraveling of de Kooning's talent in the aftermath of the *Women* paintings, when he returned to a mode of abstraction that was sadly depleted of both form and content, only underscored the point.

Similarly, Wallace Stevens's observation that in the poetry of Marianne Moore, "Subject . . . is often incidental," may indeed apply to some of the poet's minor later work, but elsewhere Moore's poetry posi-

2 *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1880–1940* by George Heard Hamilton (Yale University Press, 1967), page 15.

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tively bristles with difficult subjects. In the early masterpiece from the 1920s called *Marriage*—a work that, in my view, occupies a place in Moore's literary oeuvre akin to that of *The Waste Land* in Eliot's—the intensity and indignation prompted by the subject of matrimony is anything but "incidental." Its treatment is ferocious, as the poem's opening lines attest:

> This institution,
> perhaps one should say enterprise
> out of respect for which
> one says one need
> not change one's mind
> about a thing one has believed in,
> requiring public promises
> of one's intention
> to fulfill a private obligation:
> I wonder what Adam and Eve
> think of it by this time,
> this fire-gilt steel
> alive with goldenness;
> how bright it shows—
> "of circular traditions and impostures,
> committing many spoils,"
> requiring all one's criminal ingenuity
> to avoid!

In a new edition of *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, edited by Grace Schulman (Viking, 2003), *Marriage* runs to eight and a half pages, and remains to its very last lines one of the most caustic poems in the language—one of the scariest, too.

Georges Braque was a far gentler soul than either Willem de Kooning or Marianne Moore, and it was characteristic of his moral delicacy to wrap his statement about the artist's subject in a mantle of modesty, only to disclose in the end that, like so many other modernists, his too had been a pursuit of the Absolute. Braque's version of the Absolute no doubt differed from that of the true firebrands of modernism—among them, Piet Mondrian, Mies van der Rohe, Ad Reinhardt, and Donald Judd—yet where would any of them have been without the prior existence of Cubism, the creation of which was owed to Braque's collaboration with Picasso? It might even be said that Braque created the foundation upon which these firebrands were able to take their stand.

What, then, were the institutions that were either created or commandeered to accommodate modernism's battle of the Absolutes? Some of them have become so well established as fixtures of our cultural landscape that we can hardly imagine a time when they didn't exist—among them, the art galleries, with their one-man shows of new art; the art museums that vie with each other for the privilege of being the first to embrace what is certain to be controversial; the "little magazines," literary quarterlies and small presses without which modernist literature would never have prospered; the more problematic writers' "workshops," which seem now to have degenerated into an academic racket; and the Armory Show-type of large international exhibitions that grew out of the various "independent" and "secessionist" modernist movements of a century or more ago.

Virtually all of these art institutions were created by artists working in collaboration with amateur, non-institutional collectors, just as the little magazines, small presses, and literary quarterlies were created by poets and critics who understood that mainstream publishers were not in a position to respond to the challenges of modernist literature without the kind of spadework that only non-institutional amateurs could provide. As Lionel Trilling wrote in his essay "The Function of the Little Magazine":

> To the general lowering of the status of literature and of the interest in it, the innumerable "little magazines" have been a natural and heroic response. Since the beginning of the [twentieth] century, meeting difficulties of which only their editors can truly conceive, they have tried to keep the roads open. From the elegant and brilliant *Dial* to the latest little scrub from the provinces, they have done their work, they have kept our culture from being

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> cautious and settled, or merely sociological, or merely pious. They are snickered at and snubbed, sometimes deservedly, and no one would venture to say in a precise way just what effect they have—except that they keep the new talents warm until the commercial publisher with his customary air of noble resolution is ready to take his chance, except that they make the official representatives of literature a little uneasy, except that they keep a countercurrent moving which perhaps no one will be fully aware of until it ceases to move.[3]

Now, nearly sixty years after Trilling wrote "The Function of the Little Magazine" to mark the tenth anniversary of *Partisan Review*, the kind of "little magazine" he described in that essay is virtually extinct—as, of course, is *Partisan Review*. Some literary quarterlies have survived, but diminished in number and—with the shining exception of *The Hudson Review*—in quality as the blight of deconstructionist, post-structuralist, and other varieties of anti-literary "theory" has triumphed over literary intelligence. When we look back today on the much-maligned New Criticism, which was largely the creation of modernist poets—among them, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound—it looks like a Golden Age compared to the kind of academic obscurantism and political shadow-boxing that have supplanted it.

As for the fate of literature itself in the hands of the mainstream book publishers, we find that virtually all of the major houses in this country are now wholly owned subsidiaries of foreign conglomerates whose standard of achievement has less to do with literary quality or innovation than with access to media promotion, movie and television tie-ins, prize-winning, and other co-efficients of high profitability. Mercifully, we can still count on a number of smaller presses and some of the better university presses to save the situation, but the downside of this benefit usually entails significantly reduced royalties for the worthy writers who do get published.

We sometimes forget that the compulsion on the part of museums to keep abreast of radical innovations in contemporary art—and even, when possible, to anticipate and assist in creating a demand for them—was itself a momentous innovation in the way museums come to identify their interests and responsibilities.

Exactly how it came to pass that a nation as prosperous as ours could not summon the resources to resist the takeover of its book-publishing industry by an ailing Europe remains to be explained, but that takeover is now a *fait accompli*, and we shall be obliged to suffer its consequences for a long time to come.

In some respects, the institutions that now serve the visual arts—especially the museums and the galleries—might seem to present a much rosier prospect, for even in periods of low economic growth they have continued to prosper. Indeed, headlong and often heedless expansion of both collections and exhibition space and the funds required to support them has been the rule in the art museums for some years now. Modernist art of various persuasions has been the driving force as well as the principal beneficiary of this very expensive expansiveness as museums have hastened to respond to new artistic developments while at the same time attempting to catch up on the earlier innovations they missed out on. This museological scenario is now so familiar to us that we sometimes forget that the compul-

3 *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* by Lionel Trilling (Viking Press, 1951), page 97.

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sion on the part of museums to keep abreast of radical innovations in contemporary art—and even, when possible, to anticipate and assist in creating a demand for them—was itself a momentous innovation in the way museums come to identify their interests and responsibilities. For it obligated the museums to become, in effect, not only collectors but promoters of the art in which they were now seen to have a vested interest—a vested interest, that is, not only in the objects acquired for their collections but in the careers and celebrity of the artists who created them.

Hence the elements of hucksterism and entrepreneurial cynicism that have coarsened the character and spirit of so much museum activity today. When we enter a monstrosity like Tate Modern in London nowadays, we are straightaway put on notice by the noise, the crowds, the theatrical lighting, and the general atmosphere of vulgarity and tumult that art has been used as a bait to attract a segment of the public—free-spending youth—for which aesthetic achievement is, if not a matter of indifference, certainly not a compelling priority. And to assure a steady supply of the only kind of new art that is guaranteed to be a turn-on for this public, there are the proliferating productions of Charles Saatchi's gang of YBA's—Young British Artists—and the Tate's own atrocious Turner-Prize-winners, who can be counted upon to maintain the requisite standard of titillation.

Unlike the old Tate Gallery, our own Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum has not had to change its name but only its character to adjust to the new entrepreneurial standard. I wonder how many of the people who went to ogle Matthew Barney's freak show at the Guggenheim have any idea that this museum, with its once incomparable collection of paintings by Vasily Kandinsky, was founded in 1930 as an institution devoted to the achievements of abstract painting. (Its original name was the Museum of Non-Objective Painting.) Yet, just as its influence in that respect was contributing something important to the emergence of Abstract Expressionist painting in New York—the young Jackson Pollock, among other artists, worked as a guard in the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in its early days—the Guggenheim initiated the first of its ongoing efforts to reinvent itself—a project that has left the museum stripped of anything that can be called an identity and required, among other depredations, the sale of a great many of its Kandinsky holdings and works by other modernist masters. Today it is an institution better known for its exhibitions of Norman Rockwell and Harley Davidson motorcycles and its branch museums abroad than for anything that advances an understanding of modernist art.

Two of the other New York institutions that were founded to serve the interests of modernist art—the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art—are also at a crossroads that will determine their future course but for very different reasons. MOMA is now in the throes of yet another of its periodic expansion plans, one of the biggest in its history, and this is expected to provide the museum with far more space for the showing of its permanent collection as well as its temporary exhibitions program when the expansion is completed in 2005. Meanwhile, the museum and its public are making do with an abridged, unappealing facility in Long Island City, MOMAQNS, for a reduced exhibition schedule, and a theater on East Twenty-third Street in Manhattan for its popular film program.

At this point, we can only speculate about what this expansion will bring in the way MOMA's permanent collection—and thus modernism itself—is to be presented to the public for the remainder of the twenty-first century. If there is good reason to be hopeful about this outcome, it is mainly because John Elderfield—no doubt one of the most qualified senior curators in the field today—has been called upon to head the curatorial committee that will oversee the installation of MOMA's permanent collection

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in its new building. If there is also good reason to be anxious about the outcome, it is owing to the debacle of the museum's *MOMA2000* exhibitions, which radically recast the history of MOMA's permanent collection to conform it to a "new narrative" emphasizing social content at the expense of aesthetic innovation. This was a shift in perspective that, among other losses, had the effect of consigning the history of abstract art—one of the central developments of modernist art—to the sidelines. Given the theme-park character that governed the organization of *MOMA2000*, there was no way that the aesthetics of abstraction could be given its due. It thus remains to be seen whether Mr. Elderfield will have sufficient authority to rectify such disastrous errors of judgment in the newly expanded MOMA.

About the future of the Whitney Museum, too, we can only speculate. Its recent history, marked by a succession of incompetent directors and a board of trustees that seemed at times to have lost its mind, has been so dismal that almost any change is likely to be a change for the better. The good news is that the Whitney's plan for a harebrained expansion of its own has been cancelled for financial reasons, and the appointment of Adam D. Weinberg, a former curator at the Whitney, as the museum's new director gives us reason to expect significant improvement. It will not be easy, however, for the Whitney to win back the respect it has lost among artists as well as the critics and the public. A good place to start would be either the overhaul or the outright abandonment of the Whitney's Biennial exhibitions, which in recent years have gone from being merely ludicrous to wholly contemptible.

As for the international exhibitions like Documenta in Germany and the monster Biennials in Venice and Sao Paulo, they have now become the kind of cultural dinosaurs that have no useful functions to perform and therefore no reason to exist. There was a period, of course, when exhibitions like the 1910 Post-Impressionism exhibition in London, the 1913 Armory Show in New York, and the 1938 International Exposition of Surrealism in Paris, really did bring the public news of important avant-garde developments in modernist art. But the age of the avant-garde is long gone. Its celebrated scandals and audacities have passed into the possession of the academic curriculum, to be catalogued, codified, and otherwise processed for doctoral dissertations and classroom instruction. The pathetic attempts at artistic insolence, mostly having to do with sexual imagery and political ideology, that turn up in the Whitney's Biennial exhibitions and the art departments of the colleges and universities are better understood as efforts to attract publicity and what in the business world is called market share than as anything that can be regarded as avant-garde. In a culture like ours, in which, alas, everything is now permitted and nothing resisted, the conditions necessary for the emergence of a genuine avant-garde no longer exist. It doesn't change anything, either, to adopt the term "trangressive" as a substitute for "avant-garde," for where boundaries no longer exist it is impossible to violate them.

There was a period . . . when [certain] exhibitions . . . really did bring the public news of important avant-garde developments in modernist art. But the age of the avant-garde is long gone. . . . Today there is no avant-garde.

"Transgressive" is a term that belongs to the history of publicity rather than the history of art. Today there is no avant-garde, and the big international shows are mainly devoted to marketing and politics. Modern systems of communication have, in any case, rendered the big international shows irrelevant.

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Far more important to sustaining the aesthetic vitality of modernist art, however, has been the institution that we do not usually even think of as an institution: I mean the commercial art gallery. The art gallery as we know it today is, after all, a modern creation, barely a century old, and it performs a service for art unlike that of any other institution. It keeps the public in constant touch not only with current developments on the art scene but also with revivals of the work of earlier artists that the museums and the critics may have overlooked or underrated, and it does so at no financial cost to the viewer. More often than not, it is the gallery dealer, not the museum curator, who discovers significant new talent, for nowadays most curators make their "discoveries" in the dealers' galleries.

This is a cultural service more often enjoyed than acknowledged, but for many of us the art galleries have been a fundamental part of our aesthetic education. In this connection, it is worth recalling Clement Greenberg's tribute to the late Betty Parsons, whose gallery introduced Jackson Pollock, Hans Hofmann, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Richard Pousette-Dart, among other artists, to gallerygoers of my generation. In 1955, on the tenth anniversary of the Betty Parsons Gallery, Greenberg wrote:

> Mrs. Parsons has never lacked for courage. It is not a virtue signally associated with art dealers (or, for that matter, with art critics or museum directors either), but then she is not, at least for me, primarily a dealer. I have seldom been able to bring her gallery into focus as part of the commercial apparatus of art (I am not sneering at that apparatus); rather, I think of it as belonging more to the studio and production side of art. In a sense like that in which a painter is referred to as a painter's painter or a poet as a poet's poet, Mrs. Parsons is an artist's—and critic's—gallery: a place where art goes on and is not just shown and sold.[4]

Just as modernist art in America was, initially, an extension and appropriation of European modernism, so was a gallery like Betty Parsons' in a tradition that grew out of the precedents set by Vollard and Kahnweiler in Paris and Alfred Stieglitz's "291" gallery, which introduced Cézanne and Matisse as well as Marsden Hartley and John Marin to the New York public even before the Armory Show and long before the museums awakened to the achievements of modernism. The same could be said of the Weyhe Gallery's efforts on behalf of Gaston Lachaise and Alfred Maurer and the exhibitions devoted to Stuart Davis at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery. At every stage in the history of modernism in America, it was the galleries that set the pace in recognizing artistic achievement. This is not to suggest that all of our art dealers are sainted figures, but merely to point out that in New York, anyway, we are blessed with an extraordinary number of galleries that are places "where art goes on," and they should be given their due in any account of modernism and its institutions.

Finally, it is inevitable—or at least expected—in any discussion of modernism that the question of "postmodernism" will rear its ugly head. Or should I say, its wrong-headedness? For the entire concept of postmodernism is based on a fundamental misconception—a belief that the modernist era in art and culture is over and has been supplanted by something radically different. What we find this usually means when we get down to specific cases is a mode of art or thought in which some element of modernist sensibility has been corrupted by kitsch, politics, social theory, gender theory, or some other academic, pop-oriented, anti-aesthetic intervention. Modernism has aged to be sure, as modernity itself has aged, and in the process modernism has undeniably lost its capacity to shock or otherwise disturb us. But except

4 "Foreword to the Tenth Anniversary Exhibition of the Betty Parsons Gallery," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), Volume 3, page 256.

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for the short-lived antics of Dada and Surrealism, shock was never the essence of modernism. It was, rather, an inspired and highly successful attempt to bring art and culture into an affective and philosophical alignment with the mindset of modernity as we know it in our daily lives. Modernism endures, and does so, in part, anyway, by virtue of the institutions it has created to serve the needs of a public that is today more enlightened intellectually and aesthetically than at any other time in our history. Postmodernism, in contrast, has created no institutions of its own, largely because postmodernism is nothing but a mindset of deconstructive attitudes in search of a mission.

Looking back on the history of modernism in the twentieth century, what is especially striking is the violence that was directed against its achievements by the most horrific totalitarian regimes in recorded history: the Nazis in Hitler's Germany and the Communists in Stalin's Russia. And if we ask the question of what it was about modernist art that prompted such a massively destructive response, I believe the answer is clear: modernist art was seen to provide a spiritual and emotional haven from the coercive and conformist pressures of the societies in which it flourished. Modernism represented a freedom of mind that totalitarian regimes could not abide. It is in this sense, perhaps, that the infamous *Degenerate Art* exhibition that Hitler devoted to modernist art in Munich in 1937 may now be seen to have marked the beginning of the "postmodernist" impulse. And just as modernism survived the determined efforts of Hitler and Stalin to impugn and destroy its artistic achievements, so, I believe, will modernism and its institutions continue to prosper in the face of the nihilist imperatives of the postmodernist scam.

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The anti-American obsession

by Jean-François Revel

"Cultural diversity" has replaced "cultural exceptionalism" in the French-inspired, European rhetoric. But in actuality, the two terms cover the same kind of cultural protectionism. The idea that a culture can preserve its originality by barricading itself against foreign influences is an old illusion that has always produced the opposite of the desired result. Isolation breeds sterility. It is the free circulation of cultural products and talents that allows each society to perpetuate and renew itself.

The proof of this goes back to the old comparison between Athens and Sparta. It was Athens, the open city, that was the prolific fount of creation in letters and arts, philosophy and mathematics, political science, and history. Sparta, jealously guarding its "exceptionalism," pulled off the tour de force of being the only Greek city not to have produced a single notable poet, orator, thinker, or architect; their achievement was "diversity" of a sort, but at the price of emptiness. Parallel phenomena of cultural vacuity are found again in contemporary totalitarian states. Fear of ideological contamination induced the Nazis, the Soviets, and the Maoists to take refuge in an "official" art and a pompously dogmatic literature, sheer insults to the heritage of the peoples on whom they were inflicted.

When, in December 2001, Jean-Marie Messier said that "French-style cultural exceptionalism is dead," he aroused horrified protests, but he was not going nearly far enough. He could have added: in fact, French cultural exceptionalism has never existed, thank goodness. If it had, it would be French culture itself that would be extinct. Let's suppose that the sixteenth-century kings of France, instead of inviting Italian artists to their courts, had said to themselves: "This predominance of Italian painting is insufferable. We'll keep those painters and their pictures out of the country." The result of this castrating démarche would have been to thwart a renewal of French art. Again: between 1880 and 1914 there were many more French Impressionist paintings in American museums and the homes of private collectors than there were in France, despite which—or because of which—American art was subsequently able to find its own wellsprings, and then influence French art in turn.

These cross-fertilizations are indifferent to political antagonisms. It was during the first half of the seventeenth century, when France and Spain were frequently at war, that the creative influence of Spanish literature on the French was particularly marked. The eighteenth century, which saw repeated conflict between France and England, was also the period when the most active and produc-

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tive intellectual exchanges between the two countries occurred. And between 1870 and 1945, diplomatic relations between France and Germany were hardly idyllic, yet those were the years when German philosophers and historians had the most to teach the French. And wasn't Nietzsche steeped in the ideas of the French moralists? It would be possible to extend indefinitely the list of examples illustrating this truth: cultural diversity arises from manifold exchanges. This applies just as well to gastronomy: only McDonald's-hating lunatics are unaware of the obvious fact that there have never been so many restaurants offering foreign cuisines, in practically every country, as in our day. Far from imposing standardization, international exchange diversifies. Withdrawing behind a wall can only dry up inspiration.

In practice, Europeans—and chiefly the French—use the jargon phrases "cultural exceptionalism" and "cultural diversity" as code words for state aid and quotas. We keep hearing that, after all, "Cultural goods are not simple commodities." But that is merely a platitude. Whoever pretended that they were? Still, neither are they purely the products of state financing; otherwise, Soviet painting would have been the finest in the world.

"Look at the Italian cinema industry," people say. "Without government support, it has practically disappeared." Yet in the years after the war, the brilliance of Italian film came not from subsidies, but from Rossellini and De Sica, Blasetti and Castellani, Visconti, and Fellini. Similarly, Spanish cinema owed its blossoming in the 1980s to the imagination of its creators and not to ministerial grants. And if the French film industry in 2001 has recaptured market leadership at home and found successes abroad, this is not because it is more subsidized than formerly, but because it has managed to produce a handful of films whose quality was appreciated not only by their *auteurs*, but by the public. A commercially successful French cinema, with international appeal, evidences a more authentic diversity than the kind preached by tedious diversity-mongers.

This revival must be placed in perspective, however. As Dominique Moïsi dared to write, "The irony of this debate is increased by the fact that last year, the symbol of France's successful resistance to Hollywood's hegemony was a pleasant but very superficial comedy, *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* ("Amélie"), a string of trendy clips in advertising style without any social or intellectual content whatsoever. By comparison, Ken Loach's penetrating films, which owe nothing to cultural exceptionalism, reflect a stimulating, refreshing cultural diversity."[1]

You don't have to be an Aristotle or a Leibniz to grasp that "universal exceptionalism" is a contradiction in terms on the most elementary level of logic. And it is not the only such contradiction in a confused quarrel that has more to do with strong emotions than rational analysis. So Denis Olivennes, who heads Canal +, a television network that plays a big role in the French film industry's financing, argues that a linchpin of this financial support is a tax on all new releases. In this way, he writes, "American films, which represent about half of new releases, contribute half of the funding." Here is impressive sleight of hand. For it's obvious that American films would not provide the funds, but rather the French filmgoer. More generally, the opposition between the state and the market in relation to the arts, between public moneys and the money of the public, is a misleading one. Public funds have but one source: the public, which is taxed by one means or another, directly or indirectly. The question is what

1 "Les Deux Frances," *Les Echos*, January 14, 2002. It's worth pointing out, however, that the French film industry's two big hits in 2001–2002, *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* and *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre*, were shot in German and English studios. The reason for this is that the French government robs successful producers in order to subsidize hacks.

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proportion of the public's contribution is freely offered and what proportion is milked from it by government fiat, then spent according to the whims of a minority of political and administrative decision-makers and commissions whose members are appointed, not elected.

A culture becomes decadent when it takes to running down other cultures while heaping praises on itself. Thus the professionals of radio and television keep harping on the notion—which they end up seeming to believe and making their audiences believe—that American television movies, produced with the sole aim of making a profit, avoid all controversial social and political issues. But French series, we are told over and over again, draw from a tradition of publicly funded state television; even productions from our privatized networks follow the aesthetic canons of this tradition. So they escape the "tyranny of profit" and can risk upsetting some of their viewers by courageously airing serious, painful controversies.

But actually, the opposite is true. Michel Winkler has given ample proof of this in his book *Les Miroirs de la vie*, subtitled *Histoire des séries américains*. In an interview on Monde television, Winkler (who is a physician and a novelist, and author of the 1998 bestseller *La Maladie de Sachs*) said: "French television series are not designed to make you think. The three main networks have one and the same policy when it comes to TV drama: . . . catering to conformism. The viewers are treated like sheep." Conversely, in the United States "television, with its social critiques, has taken over from the cinema of the years between 1930 and 1950." Conventional French productions hold the public all the more captive in that only 15 percent of French people have access to cable or satellite television, compared with 80 percent in America.

Bringing grist to the mill, let me cite the episodic television drama about the Watergate affair that was filmed and broadcast in the United States very soon after Richard Nixon's resignation in the mid-seventies. The actor who played the president was virtually his double, and all the others were easily identifiable as real characters. And of course this was not the only national scandal that furnished the plot for an American TV production or movie, or a scenario close to actual events. But I'm still waiting for French equivalents: exposés, perhaps, of the insider trading that led to Pechiney's buyout of Triangle—insiders, it seems, at the highest levels of government—and of the Crédit Lyonnais and Elf scandals. If they were to be comparable to American productions, they would have to be accurate renditions of these episodes, highly unflattering to France, with a cast closely modeled on the original. It's likely that we'll have to wait a long time for these programs.

Rehashing one of the stalest Marxist clichés, Catherine Tasca, the French minister of culture, confided to the *Figaro* magazine that "market laws are the totems of American power." In fact, market laws are not so much totems as the explanation.

In the cultural as in other domains, the quarrel with globalization that flared up during the 1990s actually represents a resistance to Americanization. Here again, in our perception of America's influence as a threat and a disease, we should distinguish between what is fantastical and what is justified. And we should ask ourselves if American culture might include achievements and ways of doing things that others would do well to look at and emulate.

The fear of seeing cultural identities drowned in a kind of planetary standardization, which today is thought to be overwhelmingly American in coloration but in former times showed other hues, has no basis in historical fact or impartial observation of today's reality. The commingling of cultures, with predominance going first to one and then to another, has always led—in antiquity, in the medieval period, and in the modern world—not to uniformity, but to diversity. This is what is happening today, as the Swedish essayist Johan Norberg (among many others) has pointed out:

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"Many people are afraid that the world will become McDonaldized and homogenized: we will all end up wearing the same clothes, seeing the same films. But this is not a good description of the globalization process. Take a walk in Stockholm and look for yourself. Of course you'll find burgers and Coca Cola, but you can also pick and choose from shish kebab, sushi, Tex-Mex, Peking duck, French cheeses, Thai soup." And the author recalls what is frequently forgotten: that American culture is not just songs by Madonna and action films starring Arnold Schwarzenegger; it includes 1,700 symphony orchestras, opera attended by 7.5 million people every year, and museums that are visited by 500 million annually. Almost all American museums, where entrance is quite often free, owe their existence and funding to private sponsors.

It is surprising that artists should have so little esteem for their art that they see its international dissemination as strictly dependent on the power of money and advertising. Bertrand Tavernier, for example, whom I nevertheless knew to be a connoisseur of American cinema before he himself became a filmmaker, explained its success in these terms: "With the complicity of certain politicians and even newspapers . . . relying on a bomb-proof distribution system, Americans impose their films on us."[2] Yet Tavernier ought to know that a work of literature or art, still less a work of entertainment, can never be imposed on the public by force or cajoling. All the coercive power of the Soviet Union never succeeded, however much the commissars might have wanted to, in "imposing" official literature on readers, who preferred the clandestinely circulated, mimeographed material famously known as "samizdat" (literally, "self-published"). When the authors or distributors of this literature were caught by the police, they were charged with "cosmopolitanism"—another name for globalism—and sent to prison camps or special psychiatric hospitals.

2 Must one suppose, then, that our own French distribution system is susceptible to bombing?

In January 2002, when Yves Saint Laurent unexpectedly announced his decision to retire, suddenly bringing his career as couturier to an end, reaction to the news was worldwide. And it was not only Saint Laurent's talent that was influential everywhere, but also that of his predecessors, who for over a century had created and sustained French leadership in *haute couture* (which is not to diminish the excellence of other schools, notably the Italian). There was no suggestion in the foreign press that this traditional preeminence of French *haute couture* and Saint Laurent's influence was attributable to a "bomb-proof distribution system" that, with the shady complicity of "politicians and newspapers," had succeeded in "imposing" French styles on others. Anyone who said as much would have been ridiculed.

But the French make themselves liable to such ridicule when they assess the achievements of others. For instance, between 1948 and 1962, most of the of top prizes at the Venice Biennales were conferred on artists of the Paris school. But in 1964, when the first prize was awarded to Robert Rauschenberg, the newest leading light of a New York school that had been showing great vitality for twenty years, the French cried scandal, imperialism, and collusion with dealers.

Giancarlo Pajetta, an important Italian Communist leader, once said: "I have finally understood what pluralism is; it's when lots of people share my point of view." In that spirit, governments and elites almost everywhere have signed on to cultural globalism provided that their own countries are its source and model. In 1984, presenting a *Projet culturel extérieur de la France*, the French government said, with signal modesty, that this manifesto had "no parallel in other countries." All cultures are of equal value, conceded the authors of this official document (a statement erring on the side of simplistic political correctness), but *our* culture is predestined to be a universal mediator, for it is "shared by people of

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every continent." Touching optimism indeed, which naturally led up to the conclusion that "the future of the French language in the world can only be as a promoter of cultural progress and is closely linked to the future of people everywhere." Global homogenization of culture, in the illusions of these authors, is fine—provided that it emanates from France.

And the homogenization in question, which today is perceived most often as Americanization, is (insofar as it exists) American only in its most superficial and least durable aspects. It is above all the vehicle for popular culture—the entertainment, clothing styles, and fast foods favored by the young, and popular music (but not all of it, by any means). Here the word "culture" is being used in the rather loose sense that has prevailed because it is the entertainment industry that leads the choir in lamenting American influence. This influence may present a problem, but to identify the whole of cultural life with entertainment is a travesty.

Contrary to what Jacques Chirac maintained, globalization is not a "cultural steamroller." It is and always has been an engine of enrichment. Think, for example, how the French artistic sensibility was revitalized by the discovery—or rather fuller knowledge—of Japanese painting afforded at the end of the nineteenth century, or by the arrival in France of African art ten or twenty years later. There are plenty of similar cases. Unless one has been brainwashed by the brawlers of Seattle and Porto Alegre, the age-old lesson of the history of civilizations cannot be erased: barriers are what diminish and sterilize cultures; commingling is what fructifies and inspires them.

Science is a different matter. Research depends much more on financial support than other pursuits. This fact partly explains the current American dominance, but only partly. It stems also from the way that American universities manage to combine teaching and research much more closely than their European counterparts, excepting German and British institutions. This is one of the reasons why American universities attract so many foreign students and professors. In its report for 2002, the French revenue court criticized—yet again—the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) for its sclerosis, aging researchers, and absence of peer review. This pessimistic diagnosis is a refrain that has been periodically repeated over the last few decades, but, as is common in France in every domain, it has never led to the slightest reform. Despite these drawbacks, some Nobel Prizes have gone to French scientists in recent decades, as well as to scientists of other countries, although the United States has of course won by far the largest number. So geographical diversity still prevails in the sciences, even though the notion of "diversity" in science itself is relatively meaningless: scientific knowledge, in contrast to understanding of sculpture or music, is no different in Tokyo, Rome, or Bombay than it is in Massachusetts or California.

The equal-opportunity nature of scientific knowledge means that internationalism is a necessary condition for its most rapid progress. If Descartes, through philosophical dogmatism, had not rejected Galileo's physics, perhaps it might have fallen to a French scientist to make the discoveries that Newton eventually made in England, where speculation was much less constrained by metaphysical presuppositions than it was in France. And if Islam had not rejected modern science, perhaps Islamic countries would not have suffered from the "cultural exceptionalism" that has been theirs, and not always helpful, for the last three centuries.

For a culture to be strong and internationally prominent depends on the scope and quality of education at home and within its domain of influence, and how it adapts to evolving knowledge. The deterioration of elementary and secondary teaching in France since about 1970 is an acknowledged catastrophe, abundantly doc-

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umented and discussed. But there is less agreement about the deficiencies of French higher education. At a time when a growing portion of the population has access to higher education, the quality of university instruction is crucial for the health of a culture and its appeal to outside observers.

Why do students, teachers, and researchers from every country in the world swarm to American schools and not to ours? In an important study, *L'Université française du XIXe au XXIe siècle*, Jean-Claude Casanova ruthlessly exposes how French higher education has failed in comparison with what is available in the United States. One reason is simply lack of money. The author notes that the endowment of Harvard, certainly not the largest university in America, is close to $20 billion—more than twice the annual expenditure of France on its entire university system. A second cause of our weakness, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, has been the promotion of administrative centralization. For a long time we have spoken of "the French university" rather than "French universities." By the late nineteenth century, in his book *Les Origines de la France contemporaine,* Hippolyte Taine was convincingly describing the cultural sclerosis engendered by this academic authoritarianism.

To this lack of autonomy in our universities was added the mistake of separating teaching from research. For fifty years the harmful consequences have been regularly denounced by prominent French scientists, above all those who have had experience with German, English, and American universities. In this area as elsewhere, French reluctance to take account of the most incontrovertible studies and to make reforms (except in rhetorical fashion) has perpetuated this absurd divorce. Finally, a third weakness, according to Casanova, is that "the French university system was slow to extend education to the masses, by contrast with American universities, the first in the world to get serious about this task from the middle of the twentieth century onwards."

True culture always transcends national frontiers. Among all the contradictions of anti-Americanism, one of the oddest is that one finds condemnation of cultural internationalism even when roles are reversed—that is, when it is American culture or popular culture that is subject to foreign influence. Thus, a Québecois journalist blathers against "the cultural fast food of the hour . . . *The Phantom of the Opera,* a cultural equivalent of the Big Mac." As it happens, the show that Mme. Vaillancourt is talking about was originally not an American but a British production, and journalists should know that it was developed from the renowned French novel that came out in 1910, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra,* which we owe to Gaston Leroux. We ought to be happy that a popular French book finds itself, by means of an American adaptation, also translated onto movie screens throughout the world. But in Mario Roy's pertinent comment, "Facts have never been the point, of course."

Hatred for America is sometimes pushed to the point where it transmutes into hatred for ourselves in France. This is what we saw when the Disneyland near Paris was opened in 1992. This event was denounced by our intellectuals as a "cultural Chernobyl." But you will notice that a large part of Walt Disney's themes, especially in his feature movies, are drawn from European sources. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Sleeping Beauty,* Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio,* the musical scores in *Fantasia*, the reconstruction of the pirate's ship from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*—all are borrowings from, and homages to, European creativity. And Disney pays deference to other traditional masterpieces from various cultures—for example, *The Thousand and One Nights.*

That these popular stories, the fruit of the imagination of so many different peoples over so many centuries, orally transmitted from generation to generation, then fixed in written form by authors who collected them, should finally appear in a completely new medium thanks to the unique talent of

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a Californian artist—isn't this an example of the unforeseeable paths and crossroads of cultures? Their dynamic motifs travel by varied transmission routes, ancient and modern, scornful of the prudish chauvinism of the narrow-minded protectionists.[3]

These last will surely raise the objection that exploitation of these ancient Western and oriental legends by American show business can only betray their special qualities by deforming and commercializing them. Hollywood, as everyone knows, or ought to know, has never been anything but the capital of bad taste, vulgarity, and banality. American show business destroys other cultures more than it honors them. But at this point, we have left the sphere of reason to enclose ourselves in our own self-contradictory fantasies.

Shame at seeing the variety of cultures allegedly being effaced for the profit of America alone is reinforced by another factor, this one very real: the international spread of the English language. English is the mother tongue of approximately 380 million human beings. Almost an equal number use it as a second language, not counting the legions who know a few words and phrases, an indispensable minimum of the lingua franca for travel abroad, even in non-Anglophone countries. If this internationalization of English is largely the consequence of American superpower, does that mean it must lead to the cultural Americanization of the planet? Not at all. Obviously, to learn elementary English, enough for everyday needs—for commercial exchanges, financial transactions, even political and diplomatic business—doesn't require even a superficial familiarity with Anglo-American culture and thought, much less the abandonment of one's own culture. The utilitarian use of English by hundreds of millions of our contemporaries is clearly not incompatible with an abysmal ignorance of the great writers and thinkers as well as the historical, political, and religious events that have forged the British and American civilizations. Conversely, someone who knows scarcely a word of the Russian language can be imbued with the Russian sensibility thanks to assiduous reading of Russian classics in the often fine translations that have been made in so many languages.

And then, globalization is equally a factor in the learning of foreign languages other than English. As Mario Vargas Llosa writes, "How many millions of young people of both sexes, throughout the world, have undertaken, thanks to globalization, to learn Japanese, German, Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese, Arabic, Russian or French? Undoubtedly the number is very large, and this is a sign of our times; the trend, fortunately, will continue to grow in years to come." So let's not forget: globalization is really the facilitation of travel, both mentally and physically. The furthest destinations, once accessible only to the wealthy, are now within reach of a vast crowd of cosmopolitans, for a relatively modest sum.

One may justifiably object that the omnipresence of English could lead to the adulteration of other languages, not so much by borrowings that they make from English—this is a normal and universal linguistic phenomenon—as by the distortions in syntax and vocabulary that Anglicisms may impose. In France, Étiemble listed, from 1964, an inventory of such contaminations of the French language in its famous *Parlez-vous franglais?* If abusive or superfluous "Americanisms" do have a tendency to invade other languages, it should nevertheless be stressed that the decay of some "high culture" languages has mostly autonomous causes. There are two principal ones: the decline in educational levels in nations where they were previously high, and a spurious modernism that regards any concern to protect and develop the specific virtues of a language as backward-looking

3 I develop this theme at greater length in an article that first appeared in *Le Point* in March 21, 1992 and was then reprinted in my collection *Fin du siècle des ombres*.

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academic purism. The majority of semantic confusions, improprieties, and syntactical inconsistencies that pepper, for example, the French media language are of purely domestic origin. They owe nothing to contamination by English. Yet, it is true that the impoverishment of a language makes it more and more vulnerable to invasion by alien terms and structures—as happens today, in the majority of cases, from a bastardized English. Of course, every language must evolve, but it's a mistake to forget that the evolution can be to good or ill effect. The bombing of a cathedral is certainly one form of architectural innovation, but does that make it desirable?

It remains a fact that in the domain of languages too, globalization leads to variety, not uniformity. The spread of English facilitates communication and mutual influence between cultures; it is hardly a trivial matter when, thanks to the lingua franca, Japanese, Germans, Filipinos, Italians, Russians, French, Brazilians, etc., can participate in the same colloquium, sharing information and ideas. Meanwhile, many more people than in the past speak or understand, in addition to their native language, one or two foreign languages other than English.

The real danger—conceivably a mortal one—for European culture is that anti-American and antiglobalist phobias might derail progress. Guy Sorman has shown the scientific and technological retreats this obscurantism has led to in his book *Le Progrès et ses ennemis*. And this isn't some "right-wing" or "left-wing" thesis; it is a rational one. It is defended alike by the liberal-democrat Sorman and by the socialist Claude Allègre. The latter wages war against the idea that Europe should abandon nuclear energy, genetic engineering and research using embryonic cells. Should the pressure groups that agitate against progress win the day, in twenty years the European states will regress, he writes, "to the level of the underdeveloped countries, in a world that will be dominated by the United States and China" (*L'Express*, February 7, 2002.) The anti-American fanatics will then have succeeded in making Europe even more dependant on the United States than it is today.

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The poet of the Reich

by John Simon

German-language poetry from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century produced three superstars: Rainer Maria Rilke, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Stefan George. Among them, they accomplished almost everything modern German lyric poetry could do; the rest was filled in later by Bertolt Brecht and Paul Celan. By way of a somewhat simplistic analogy, one could say that Rilke was a Mozart, although less merry; Hofmannsthal a Schubert, although less prolific; George an amalgam of Beethoven and Wagner. The marvel is that they were contemporaries, offering simultaneously their near-infinite variety.

For Anglophone readers, Rilke has been translated almost to death—though, of course, no translation of lyric poetry ever quite does the trick. Hofmannsthal, whose lyrical output was far from copious, is not well known hereabouts for his lyrical poetry or his plays, only for his librettos for Richard Strauss. George, despite some translations, is the least known of the three. Even loudly dropped, his name is unlikely to produce reverberations in American ears.

One of the problems—and it is a big one—is that George has become associated with the rise of Nazism. This is partly right and partly not. Some of George's ideas, as promulgated by him and his circle of followers, the George *Kreis*, were indeed close to those of National Socialism, but on a more elevated, intellectual plane, and were co-opted, without George's explicit consent, by the Nazis. George was neither the innocent his champions have tried to make of him, nor was he entirely seduced by the Nazis, without, however, openly rejecting them. What might have come of this political relationship remains unknowable; George died at age sixty-five in 1933.

Robert E. Norton's critical biography *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle*[1] is, at some 750 pages, the first exhaustive analysis in English (and perhaps any language) of George and the George Circle. Like *Paradise Lost* in Dr. Johnson's view, no one would have wished it any longer. Still, for all its minutiae, its sedulous (and perhaps overzealous) attention to marginal or background phenomena, detailed accounts of the careers of George disciples and apostates, and even occasional repetitions and longueurs, the book all but justifies its length.

Norton exhibits a nice sense of humor and welcome unpretentiousness. But his book does have a few drawbacks. Except for the occasional key word, quotations from George are given only in English, which in the case of the profusely quoted poetry is a serious loss, uncompensated for by Norton's not always even accurate prose trans-

1 *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle*, by Robert Edward Norton; Cornell University Press, 832 pages, $49.95.

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lations. I can appreciate the publisher's unwillingness to make the book longer yet, but even readers with a little German ought to have been given some sense of George's idiosyncratic diction, sovereign prosody, and magnificent sound.

Consequently, although Norton offers cogent interpretations of the meanings and implications of George's verse, he seldom addresses what makes it so often hypnotic—for which, of course, he would have had to reproduce the German texts. Moreover, though we read that he is "Professor and Chair of German and Russian Languages and Literatures at the University of Notre Dame," and though he writes generally flavorous and resonant English, there are throughout the book inexcusable lapses. A few examples: Horace's famous *aere perennius* means "more enduring than brass," not "granite." *Lady from the Sea*, which Ibsen wrote at sixty, is hardly "a youthful work." Poems do not "comprise a book," but vice versa. French knows a *bon vivant* and a *viveur*, but not a *bon viveur*. There are no such words as "obstinance" and "prophesized." Redundancy is frequent, as in "they shared little else in common." Things have come to a pretty pass when academics write like this. Still, *Secret Germany* is an imposing achievement of research, readability, and exemplary fairness: dedication without partisanship, judicious balance of pros and cons, and leaving no pebble—let alone stone—unturned.

Stefan George was born July 12, 1868 in Budesheim near Bingen, on the southwestern bank of the Rhine. His father was a prosperous and easygoing tavern keeper who later moved to Bingen, where he owned vineyards and became a successful wine merchant. He was a permissive but rather distant father to Stefan and his siblings. The mother, however, was a dour woman, a stranger even to her husband, who "refused any expression of tenderness from her children [and] even actually forbade them from kissing her." One need not be a Freudian to perceive here the root of George's subsequent misogyny, inability to have sexual relations and more than very rare friendships with women.

The Rhineland, in the wake of Napoleonic conquests, was under strong French influence, and the Georges even had French ancestors. The perfectly bilingual Stefan was until his early twenties known as Etienne, and then pronounced his last name in the French manner. The family was Catholic, and George, even after losing his faith early on, retained a love for the ritual, vocabulary, and hierarchic aspects of Catholicism. Disappointed that his son was uninterested in the family business, his father nevertheless supported Stefan's progress toward poetry.

Even during the early school days in Darmstadt, certain governing characteristics and lifelong pursuits announced themselves. Young Stefan already tended to dominate and make strict demands on the absolute loyalty of his friends, founded a school magazine, and devised a new language. In an immature poem, the hero, Prince Indra, resists the girl Aspara's "vile temptations." Stefan had the uncanny ability to pick up languages, and a strong sense of being destined for the role of priest rather than just poet. He also declared himself "the worst kind of anarchist." Growing aware of his physical attraction to boys, and partly to escape from it, George set out on his travels, first to England to learn English, shortly thereafter to an important destination: Paris.

Through a minor practitioner, Albert Saint-Paul, George encountered the Symbolist poets of the day—the first major, and perhaps only, influence on him. He met Verlaine, Jean Moréas, Albert Mockel, Henri de Régnier (whom Norton mistakenly calls Belgian), Francis Vielé-Griffin, André Fontainas, and others, and read Baudelaire assiduously. Most important was the meeting with Stéphane Mallarmé and attendance at his famous Tuesday evenings. The French poet treated the young German kindly, and George absorbed many of the master's views and manners, even something of his mode of dress. Though he eventually disenthralled himself from Mallarmé's influence, he carried his hieratic stance much further, and

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retained a spark of respect for his French namesake.

Travel was to become George's lifelong addiction, and from Paris he went on to Spain. The memento from that journey was a blue wool Basque beret, which, rakishly slanted, he wore on and off for the rest of his life. Returning to Paris, he almost stayed there, intending to write poetry in French. Some of his French poems are not without merit, and he also wrote some in Lingua Romana, one of the languages he invented.

Henceforth George was never to stay anywhere more than a few months, often only weeks. He was by now an eccentric apparition, severely garbed in quasi-priestly black, and always looking much older than his years. His first poetry volume, *Hymnen*, appeared in 1890 in a deliberately small edition of a hundred copies. It was not till very much later that he chose to come out in larger printings. It was followed the next year by *Pilgerfahrten* ("Pilgrimages"), both volumes showing genuine promise.

There had been some experiments in closeness with men, but it was not till December 1891 that George thought he had found the perfect companion. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, only seventeen, was already an accomplished poet and essayist under the pen name Loris, though still a schoolboy in knee pants. The youth, Vienna's literary sensation, was sitting in the Café Griensteidl, the premier writers' hangout, when a "person of very strange appearance with an arrogant, passionate expression on his face," who seemed much older than Hugo, walked up to him and declared that he had already read one of Loris's essays and considered the author one of the few Europeans, and only Austrian, he wanted to meet. Hofmannsthal guessed that this was Stefan George. Kindred spirits, they loved the same poets, and Hugo, moreover, had the slender yet athletic build, soulful eyes, and extreme youth that George was always drawn to. "For the first time in his adult life," Norton writes, "Stefan George had fallen helplessly, totally and irreversibly in love."

Poems were exchanged, brief letters sent, some further meetings arranged. George would walk the twelfth-grader home from school, and even sent a large bouquet of roses to the boy in class. Fascinated at first, Hugo soon became embarrassed, then frightened. George's viciously kicking a pesky stray dog was the last straw for the animal-loving Hofmannsthal. His subsequent avoidance of Stefan elicited a letter with a thinly veiled threat of a duel unto death. Hugo informed his father, who, in turn, wrote George asking him to leave his son alone. But there were more letters—George's alternately pathetic and insulting—until the older poet left Vienna. In later years, there was some correspondence and even the occasional meeting, but no permanent rapprochement, although George and his circle continued to admire Hofmannsthal as poet, while rejecting as vulgar his career as librettist. This alleged discrepancy was once explained by George as the decline of Nero from a gifted young man to a bloody tyrant. The absurd comparison, Norton observes, shows to what lengths George "would go to punish anyone who denied him what he wanted."

George's cruel, tyrannical side emerged in the third poetry volume, *Algabal* (1892), another very limited edition. Here George compares himself to the vicious Roman emperor Heliogabalus, albeit in a German avatar, as the despotic ruler of a dark underground realm made of coal, where he wishes to grow the "great dark black flower." Says Algabal: "I want the people to die and groan/ And anyone who laughs shall be nailed to the cross." This is Mallarmé's elitist stance brutally exaggerated. For George, the poet is the absolute prophet, lawmaker, and leader—and bear in mind the German for leader: *Führer*.

In 1892, there came about an event of utmost importance: the publication of George's magazine *Blätter für die Kunst* ("Pages for the Arts"). In the twenty-seven years during which it fitfully appeared, it was to be, as Norton writes, "the nucleus around

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which George constructed his life." Many of his poems first appeared there, along with George-inspired prose dictates, and George kept energetically recruiting new talent for its pages. It was to be for a time "the most visible, and the most successful, instrument of his relentless will to exert power over people and things, to set his stamp on the world." In time, "to be connected with the *Blätter* was to involve far more than to be a contributor to the journal; it meant that one subscribed to an entire system of belief, to a set of specific values, and above all that one recognized George as a spiritual, and not just poetic, mentor and guide." The contributors were to be occasionally men of genuine talent, more often worshipful imitators—young men whom George found physically attractive and complaisant.

Despite his contempt for the actual Germany, George now advocated an ideal, spiritual Germany with himself as leader. "How long it takes and how difficult it is to teach Germans a little taste," he complained. Although he maintained sporadic residence in Bingen, he now moved to Schwabing, Munich's version of the Latin Quarter. He started gathering his first circle of disciples, notably the eccentric near-geniuses Ludwig Klages and Alfred Schuler, both of them, among other things, rabid anti-Semites. George's own attitude toward Jews was vacillating, but finally he was more concerned with a person's allegiance to him than with his religion.

George tried, in all seriousness, to convince the Germans of how awful they really were, which earned him, along with many enemies, the veneration of those who believed him their flawless superior. One such was the painter Melchior Lechter, who was to design most of George's books, creating also the George typeface, which resembled the poet's recherché handwriting. Among other things, George rejected the German rule to capitalize all nouns, at the same time dredging up many an archaism and rare word. By way of reshaping Germany according to his image of it, George for a while had the *Blätter* eliminate all words of foreign origin, which lead to weird coinages. Yet his idea of the poem as a mood was clearly derived from the French Symbolists' *état d'âme*. He also invented a new punctuation. Instead of commas, he used a period at hyphen level, also, for a fuller stop than a single, a double period. The last pre-Lechter collection, the *Books of Eclogues and Eulogies of Legends and Songs and of the Hanging Gardens* (1985), forms a transition to George's ripe manner, with the sense of structure and finish—the melodious or marmoreal falling into place of verse after verse—not yet fully achieved.

But in 1897 George's finest collection appeared, the lyrically opulent *Das Jahr der Seele* ("The Year of the Soul"), the first to be designed by Lechter: a luxurious tome bound in the finest Japanese cover, printed on sumptuous paper, with the George lettering. Deep black letters were introduced by red or blue initials (for strophes and lines, respectively). These, and the title-page woodcut of a long-robed, winged angel seated at a pipe organ, were supposed to recapture the imagined virtues of a Gothic past.

The painter and journalist Marie von Bunsen described at this time George's appearance at a private poetry reading in the salon of the painter Sabine Lepsius, one of George's very few woman friends.

> Never in my entire life have I been confronted with such a strange face: pale, worn, with tired heavy eyelids, a mouth vibrating with a severe expression. The cheekbones are strongly pronounced, the forehead is massively domed, from it rise dark masses of hair. His features, emaciated by thought and inner battles, look much, much older than his twenty-eight years. His profile has a provocative similarity to the portrait of Dante in the Bargello. The entire head, the thin nervous hands, strangely remind one of the young Liszt. He read with a soft, even voice, with fine, distinct intonation.

With *The Year of the Soul* George begins, as Norton observes, "to assert a place in the

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public consciousness that he would come to occupy for the rest of his life." By now he is getting important new disciples: Karl Wolfskehl, Friedrich Gundolf, and more, writers in their own right. Also the fine and loyal publisher Georg Bondi.

In 1899, George published *Der Teppich des Lebens* ("The Tapestry of Life"), marking the transition from the lyrical to the didactic and propagandist, with poetry becoming secondary to consolidating the circle of followers with him as unquestioned Master. In these poems misanthropy intensifies along with cliquishness, with homoerotic relationships also prominent. The pretense of seeking out poetic talent for the *Blätter* was gradually dropped, and George's friends would search merely, both among their acquaintances and in public places, for comely young men who would please the Master. Such a youth walked as a timid student into George's presence at Heidelberg University. He was Friedrich Gundelfinger, whose Jewish name George promptly changed to Gundolf. An inspired talker and very handsome, he became the most literary member of the circle, and eventually also George's biographer—or, rather, hagiographer.

The first *Kreis* was the so-called Cosmic Circle because of the grandiose, and often also bizarre, ideas of the chief members, Klages and, especially, Schuler. Descriptions of Schuler's sayings, writings, and actions are among the funniest pages of *Secret Germany*. Thus for Schuler salt symbolized the sperm of the ancestors, and warm water was the symbol of sperm in general. From the philosopher J. J. Bachofen, through Schuler's mediation, George derived his notion of "supersexual love," allegedly found in Plato, Dante, and Shakespeare. But George could also flee from one of Schuler's orations at a supposedly ancient Roman feast, muttering "This is madness!" Another disciple, Wolfskehl, carried a revolver around and shot himself in the leg. Klages, Schuler, Wolfskehl—all had more or less violent world views, often suggested or adopted by the Master. And it was in Schwabing that Schuler came up with the swastika as a favorite emblem, and ranted on about the perfidy of the Molochites, a term he coined for Jews and others he reprehended.

Many of the Cosmics' meetings took place in the house of the prominent publisher Hugo Bruckmann and Elsa, his rich Romanian countess wife, later on Schuler's literary executor. It was here that in 1924 a former officer, just out of imprisonment for anarchic activities, became exposed to the late Alfred Schuler's ideas, still in vogue in the Bruckmann salon. His name was Adolf Hitler. Though Norton sensibly warns against guilt by association, he spots an undeniable irony in that "Elsa Bruckmann, a female member of the haute bourgeoisie, should stand as the first tangible link between the ideas of the George Kreis and National Socialism, between the two forces that would alter Germany, and the world, forever."

The great love of George's life was to be a youth named Maximilian Kronenberger, whose wealthy brewer father was a converted Jew. Good-looking, though not extraordinarily so, Max was spotted at age fourteen by George on the periphery of Schwabing. The friendship with the precocious youth progressed fitfully. There were wild parties to which Max was invited, and there were pictures taken, including a nude one from a side-rear angle that became one of George's icons. Then came the terrible shock to George when Max, returning from a visit to Vienna, came down with meningitis, and died the day after his sixteenth birthday. "For George," Norton writes, "nothing could ever be the same again. . . . George had long seen himself as a secular priest. What had been missing was a god. With Maximin's advent, that finally changed." George devoted several poems to a cycle about Maximin, as he Romanized the name, from the first of which Norton translates: "To him you are a child to him a friend/ I see in you a God/ Whom I recognized with a shudder/ Whom I worship."

The next main publication by the Master was the poetry collection *Der siebente Ring*

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("The Seventh Ring"), which contains the Maximin cycle. What George strives for and achieves here is the adulatory subservience of his disciples, who became ever more ready to proclaim his quasi-messianic status, and competed with one another in expressions of blind faith.

George was not interested in reform, only in complete overthrow of the status quo, and such a radical, absolutist position easily seduces the young. To this *The Seventh Ring* owes its success: the advocacy of total destruction to the modern world and erection of a new one over its ashes; and, ironically, seven years after its publication, the exceptionally bloody First World War catastrophically obliged.

Both the poetry and the unsigned prose pronouncements of the *Blätter* elicited widespread emulation: the archaizing diction, the unorthodox spelling and punctuation, even the Master's ornamental handwriting were reverently adopted. Gundolf's hagiographic publications were particularly influential in spreading the circle's idealized image and endowing its Führer with all-but-divine status.

In 1909, George announced his founding of the *Jahrbuch für die geistige Bewegung* ("Yearbook for the Spiritual Movement"), as it were the political offshoot of the *Blätter*. It was to be a *Kampfschrift* (battle journal), unmasking the rot of liberal Germany, its officialdom and culture, its political and social structure. It was in the *Yearbook* that Wolfskehl first gave the name "Secret Germany" to George and his disciples, "the true driving forces of the time." At the same time, George, though many of his admirers were in the universities, declared these institutions worthless purveyors of useless knowledge. "Fifty books are enough for a respectable human being," he said, "All the rest is 'education.'"

George advocated war as purger and purifier. This became patent in his next volume of poetry, *Der Stern des Bundes* ("The Star of the Covenant"), which got a cheaper and larger printing than previous ones, but was still not widely available. He had first intended it to be a *Geheimbuch*, a secret book and the testament of the Secret Germany.

When World War One broke out, many young Germans faced death in battle carrying *The Star of the Covenant* with them as a sort of breviary. George meanwhile was safely ensconced in Switzerland, enjoying "a nice objectivity." Meanwhile the disciples hailed the war in an article that memorably stated, "Attila has more to do with culture than all the Shaws, Maeterlincks, d'Annunzios and so on combined." Gundolf, Wolfskehl, and the rest beat the martial drum with George's approval; even Thomas Mann expressed his approbation. About this time the first newspaper articles from outside the *Kreis* announced that George's Secret Germany was the real, the only true Germany.

During the war, the Master's health began to deteriorate from what, though unacknowledged, seems to have been chronic gonorrhea. But George was cheered by a letter from a soldier at the front: "Now we are fighting for Germany, but after the war for you." The war brought out George's racism and jingoism.

For the slaughter of the war—which, after all, did not become his holy war—he blamed the bourgeoisie and women. The worst thing that could befall Germans was *Blutschmach*, literally blood-disgrace, i.e., miscegenation. Here the long poem "Der Krieg" (The War) is of particular interest. In it George declares (I translate): "In the quarrel as you feel it I take no part." And as Norton renders it (with George's own punctuation), "<You who swing the broadsword over mounds of corpses•/ Wish to preserve us from too easy an end/ And from the worst•from blood-disgrace>! Peoples/ That commit it are to be indiscriminately exterminated." Commenting on this passage, which he calls "the nadir of George's entire poetic career in moral if not also in artistic terms," Norton writes that "it is difficult not to think that in such utterances the seeds were planted of later crimes. . . . Without much effort at all, his pronouncements could

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be understood . . . as condoning the mass liquidation of entire peoples."

The postwar years saw George's importance and influence even greater than before. "More and more," Norton observes, "his austere convictions were seen as offering a viable alternative to the inner and social restlessness of innumerable Germans . . . and began to appeal to . . . the very German populace he had spent most of his life scorning." People looked to him for "consolation, direction, and hope." *Blätter für die Kunst*, at its twenty-sixth anniversary, was printed in twenty times larger editions and widely distributed. The poem "To the Dead," printed therein, showed how much of George's vision was coming true. Not only his view that the Versailles Treaty would propel into power a savagely vengeful regime, but also many details proved prophetic, e.g., the "raised hands" and the "resounding mouths," and, above all "the banners with a true sign"—the very emblem George and the *Kreis* had adopted as their own, and that appeared on their publications: the swastika.

Under George's tutelage, the followers now proceeded to publish *Geisterbücher* ("Spirit Books"), whose prototype was Gundolf's *Goethe*. Ostensibly a piece of literary criticism or biography, it was really an excuse for promulgating George's ideas —highbrow agitprop, or, as George succinctly said, "*Geisterbücher* are politics." Lechter designed for them a logo centering on the swastika. To be sure, George declared that what "came out under his aegis had nothing to do with anyone else's politics." But by 1928, which was also the date of George's final poetry collection, *Das neue Reich* ("The New Realm"), people did not bother with fine distinctions. In "The Hanged Man," as also in a poem from *The Seventh Ring*, George envisioned a jailed criminal as the hero who performs "the task"; in the newer poem, the gallows are associated with the swastika, and the outlaw hero about to hang promises to return and use the swastika as a weapon.

An eyewitness reports that although George "condemned the Nazis' excesses, and was repelled by the plebeian, mass-like character of the whole movement, he still welcomed the change as such." It was, as the poet himself said, "at least the first time that the views he had advocated were being echoed by the outside world." Also, the "Jews should not be surprised if I side with the Nazis." While not denying being the forefather of the new nation and not rejecting spiritual collaboration with it, his ultimate position was that he had envisioned the Secret Germany, it was up to others to make it real. How was not his concern.

That George withdrew in the fall of 1933 to Switzerland—a villa in Minusio on Lago Maggiore—is not to be construed as self-exile: that is where he had spent two previous winters. His old illness reasserted itself, and on December 4 he died. What matters in the final reckoning, Norton argues, is that George and his circle paved the way on which the Nazis rode to power. In a final irony, Claus von Stauffenberg, the young aristocrat and officer who tried to assassinate Hitler, was one of George's latter-day disciples. But the act he paid for with his life was done not for the sake of democracy, but for bringing about the ideals of his master.

As Walter Benjamin commented, "If ever God has punished a prophet by fulfilling his prophecy, then that is the case with George." Young Max Kommerell, a follower, defined George's poetry in a 1920 letter: "Harmonious functioning of intoxication and order, indeed, intoxication as order." And Ludwig Marcuse wrote that, "George is truly the wonderfully honest affirmation of a great error." Brecht was to remark: "The column that this stylite sought out for himself is selected with too much cunning. It stands on too populous a spot and presents a too picturesque sight."

As the historian Golo Mann notes in his brief, brilliant paragraph on George, he "taught the German language a steep, sometimes bewitchingly beautiful artistry," but "to be lordlier than one's time, to sit in judgment over it with priestly gestures, for this, sooner or later, one will be punished."

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Orwell on writing

by Jeffrey Meyers

George Orwell, whose books have sold a phenomenal forty million copies in more than sixty languages, was the most influential prose stylist of the twentieth century. Kingsley Amis observed that "no modern writer has his air of passionately believing what he has to say and of being passionately determined to say it as forcefully and simply as possible." Norman Mailer maintained: "I don't think there's a man writing English today who can't learn how to write a little better by reading his essays. Even his maxims and instructions on how to write well are superb." Like Hobbes and Swift, Orwell saw writing not only as a powerful tool for conveying ideas, but also as a demanding and enthralling art with a moral imperative to search for truth.

In an autobiographical note of April 1940, Orwell said "the modern writer who has influenced me most is Somerset Maugham, whom I admire immensely for his power of telling a story straightforwardly and without frills." Both writers were masters of lucid prose and advocated direct language and unambiguous expression. They believed that the writer ought to communicate in the clearest possible way, and they employed a plain style that appealed to their readers' common sense. Maugham wrote that "good prose should be like the clothes of a well-dressed man, appropriate but unobtrusive"; Orwell echoed him in his famous simile: "Good prose is like a window pane." Despite their preference for simplicity, both were also deeply moved when young by the rich sounds and exotic associations of John Milton's high style. Maugham noted "the exultation, the sense of freedom which came to me when first I read in my youth the first few books of *Paradise Lost*." Orwell also recalled that "when I was about sixteen I suddenly discovered the joy of mere words. . . . The lines from *Paradise Lost* . . . sent shivers down my backbone."

Like Maugham, Orwell trusted his audience to share his values and understanding of the world, but he also sought to increase their political awareness. He developed a clear, racy, supple style, fluent and readable, forceful and direct, with a colloquial ease of expression. The critic Edmund Wilson, defining his essential qualities, praised his "readiness to think for himself, courage to speak his mind, tendency to deal with concrete realities rather than theoretical positions, and prose style that is both downright and disciplined." The English historian Veronica Wedgwood elegantly described Orwell's combination of passion and restraint: "the strength of his feelings and his determination that they should not intrude make his style spare and economical, while his acute observation and sensibility make its very bleakness the more powerful."

Fascinated by every aspect of an author's life, in the course of his all-too-brief career Orwell discussed the teaching of creative writing, revising one's work, being edited, editing others, author's notes, and the

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limitations of reviewers. In his "As I Please" newspaper column in the Socialist London *Tribune*, he satirized ads for writing courses (which were just beginning in England and have since become entrenched college courses, even majors, in America). He effectively punctured their pretensions with a commonsensical question: "If these [anonymous] people really knew how to make money out of writing, why aren't they just doing it instead of peddling their secret at 5/- a time? . . . If Bernard Shaw or J. B. Priestley offered to teach you how to make money out of writing, you might feel that there was something in it. But who would buy a bottle of hair restorer from a bald man?"

In June 1940, chronically poor and still under pressure to earn money after more than a decade as a writer, Orwell reflected that his apparent ease of composition had been achieved by years of practice and repetition: "Nowadays, when I write a review, I sit down at the typewriter and type it straight out. Till recently, indeed till six months ago, I never did this and would have said that I could not do it. Virtually all that I wrote was written at least twice, and my books as a whole three times—individual passages as many as five or ten times."

Reviews and articles kept Orwell going as he labored to complete his novels, and he was interesting on the practical problems of writing for newspapers. As a highly contentious and polemical author, hostile to any form of censorship, he loathed cuts that weakened his argument and changed his meaning, yet had to accept the reality of being edited. He told his agent: "In my experience one can never be sure that one's stuff will get to press unaltered in any daily or weekly periodical. The *Observer*, for instance, habitually cuts my articles without consulting me if there is a last-minute shortage of space. In writing for papers like the *Evening Standard*, I have had things not merely cut but actually altered, and of course even a cut always modifies the sense of an article to some extent. What really matters here is whether or not one is dealing with a civilized and intelligent paper."

When Orwell took over as literary editor of the *Tribune* in November 1943, he found his desk drawers "stuffed with letters and manuscripts which ought to have been dealt with weeks earlier, and hurriedly shut it up again." As an editor himself, he had a fatal tendency to accept manuscripts which he knew very well could never be printed, but didn't have the heart to send back. When he considered manuscripts submitted to the newspaper, he must have remembered Gordon Comstock's bitter rage (in Orwell's novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*) when his verse was politely rejected: "Why be so bloody mealy-mouthed about it? Why not say outright, 'We don't want your bloody poems. We only take poems from chaps we were at Cambridge with.'" In June 1947 Orwell, an ex-policeman, recalled his generous weakness as editor and concluded the discussion with a characteristically witty simile: "It is questionable whether anyone who has had long experience as a free-lance journalist ought to become an editor. It is too like taking a convict out of his cell and making him governor of the prison."

Reserved about his private life and wary of improper publicity, Orwell was reluctant to provide biographical details for his dust jackets and, because of his prematurely lined face and idiosyncratic mustache, didn't think his photograph would be a good advertisement for his books. He complained about the low standards of book critics and told his fellow novelist Anthony Powell, "the reviewers are awful, so much so that in a general way I prefer the ones who lose their temper & call one names to the silly asses who mean so well & never bother to discover what you are writing about." Though *Animal Farm* was enthusiastically received in 1945, Orwell felt reviewers had missed an essential aspect and called them "grudging swine . . . not one of them said it's a beautiful book."

Orwell's illuminating comments on his own work show how desperately he wanted to be a writer and how long he had to struggle to become one. He destroyed his early stories and first novel, and after return-

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ing from police duties in Burma, worked as a dishwasher, hop-picker, tutor, teacher, and tramp before publishing his first book, the autobiographical *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), at the age of twenty-nine. In his introduction to the French translation the following year, he defended the truthfulness and explained the artistic rearrangement of the incidents in that book: "As for the truth of my story, I think I can say that I have exaggerated nothing except in so far as all writers exaggerate by selecting. I did not feel I had to describe events in the exact order in which they happened, but everything I have described did take place at one time or another."

Orwell found it difficult to invent fictional incidents and wanted to use the events of his early life in *Coming Up for Air* (1939), but he also saw the technical weakness in telling the story from the hero's point of view. "You are perfectly right," he told a friend, "about my own character constantly intruding on that of the narrator. I am not a real novelist anyway, and that particular vice is inherent in writing a novel in the first person, which one [i.e., Orwell] should never do. One difficulty I have never solved is that one has masses of experience which one passionately wants to write about, e.g. the part about fishing in that book, and no way of using them up except by disguising them as a novel." Orwell felt that he should use every scrap of his experience in his work. If it couldn't be placed in an essay or review, it ought to be "used up" in his fiction.

Most writers, after struggling for seventeen years to achieve literary success, would have remained in London to be lionized and enjoy their celebrity. But Orwell, immune to the effects of wealth and fame, couldn't endure the popularity of *Animal Farm* in 1945. It didn't match his guilt-ridden idea of himself. Success also led to the conflict between accepting endless lucrative offers to write for periodicals and dedicating himself to his more serious books. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was beginning to take shape in his mind, and he wanted to rest for two months and allow the idea to germinate. "I am anxious to get out of London," he wrote a friend, "because I am constantly smothered under journalism—at present I am doing 4 articles every week—and I want to write another book which is impossible unless I can get 6 months quiet." Quite unexpectedly, the man who'd always hated Scotland took off for the remote island of Jura in the Inner Hebrides.

When he finished *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, under harsh living conditions and with a terminal illness, Orwell, with his usual honesty, saw the flaws in his work and conceded: "the vulgarity of the [torture in the] 'Room 101' business. I was aware of this while writing it, but I didn't know another way of getting somewhere near the effect I wanted. . . . I am not pleased with the book but I am not absolutely dissatisfied. I first thought of it in 1943. I think it is a good idea but the execution would have been better if I had not written it under the influence of TB."

Orwell's description of his ghastly treatment in the tuberculosis sanatorium is very close to his portrayal of Winston Smith after his torture in the novel and reveals Orwell's horrific condition when completing the book: "the truly frightening thing was the emaciation of his body. The barrel of the ribs was as narrow as that of a skeleton. . . . The curvature of the spine was astonishing. The thin shoulders were hunched forward so as to make a cavity of the chest, the scraggy neck seemed to be bending double under the weight of the skull." When Orwell was in the sanatorium, the doctors had to take extreme measures to prevent him from writing. The medical staff, insisting on complete physical and mental rest, confiscated his typewriter. When he kept on writing with a ballpoint pen, they put his right arm in plaster.

Orwell, able to write four serious articles a week (or about 200 articles a year!), was a desperately driven and manically compulsive writer. In one of his most revealing passages (in a notebook of 1949), he confessed,

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despite his extraordinary output, that he always felt guilty about his work and fearful that his creative energy would dry up:

> as soon as a book is finished, I begin, actually from the next day, worrying because the next one is not begun, & am haunted with the fear that there never will be a next one—that my impulse is exhausted for good & all.

Though guilt made Orwell miserable, it also energized him and drove him to produce his impressive body of work.

Orwell completed the final draft of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in November 1948, but found it too indecipherable to send to a typist. His friends desperately tried to find a London secretary to go to Jura. Despite intensive efforts, no one was willing to help the distinguished author type his extraordinary manuscript—even at two or three times the going rate of pay. He had to sit up in bed typing the final copy of the 150,000-word novel, finally collapsed, and went into the hospital. Mortally ill when *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in June 1949, he died seven months later, before he could enjoy his newfound wealth. The creation of the novel virtually killed Orwell, and its vision of the future (by a man who himself had no future) is correspondingly grim. It's not surprising that in "Why I Write" he exclaimed that "writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness."

Orwell had limited success in creating a credible first-person narrator in his fiction, but his lively persona made the essay his most successful genre. His essays on writing fall into two main categories: the writer's life and the search for truth. These essays—and three passages from his novels—cover many aspects of writing: the deceptions of advertising, book reviewing, writers' income and authors' motives; the creation of new words, genesis of satire, purity of language, political pamphlets, keeping a diary, and rewriting history.

With a keen nose for the bogus, Orwell saw early on the falsity and fraudulence of the newly spawned advertising agencies that now contaminate the media. Orwell, who'd been to school with the advertising innovator David Ogilvy, had amused himself in childhood by answering a fake ad for a weight-reducing course and, pretending to be an obese lady, had deliberately prolonged the cheeky correspondence. "Do come before ordering your summer frocks," the weight-reducer insisted, "as after taking my course your figure will have altered out of recognition." This went on for some time, he recalled, "during which the fee gradually sank from two guineas to half a crown, and then I brought the matter to an end by writing to say that I had been cured of my obesity by a rival agency."

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* Orwell's embittered hero and would-be poet Gordon Comstock is forced by poverty to take a humiliating job as a hack writer in a cynical, Americanized advertising agency. He calls it the dirtiest swindle of capitalism, and (in a farm metaphor) "the rattling of a stick inside a swill-bucket." When the boss discovers that Comstock has published poetry, he promotes him to copy-editor and launches him on a successful career. Fearful that he'll be trapped by "blind worship of the money-god," Gordon manages to escape. But when his girlfriend Rosemary becomes pregnant during their *plein air* frolics, he feels obliged to marry her and is trapped once again in his old job.

Orwell's family in Southwold and Leeds, and visitors to his London flat and house on the island of Jura, emphasized how hard he worked and how he constantly pounded away at the typewriter. The endless clacking sound became part of his legend. But no one ever mentioned him sitting quietly (if not comfortably, for he thrived on hardship) in a chair and actually reading the books he was reviewing. The chief bore (he felt) was having to read at least fifty pages of each book to avoid making a howler, but he eventually learned to skip expertly through these useless volumes.

He begins the autobiographical "Confes-

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sions of a Book Reviewer" like a satiric short story—with himself as the satiric victim. Looking (like Orwell) much older than his age and plagued by unpaid bills, predatory creditors, and tax demands, the literary hack tries in vain to write his way out of poverty as a book reviewer. Since most books are worthless yet somehow have to be praised, Orwell calls book reviewing "a quite exceptionally thankless, irritating and exhausting job." To alleviate this tedium, he advocates fewer but longer reviews; and claims that the book reviewer is, at least, better off than the film critic, who has to praise a greater proportion of trash. Since there's an endless supply of amateurs eager to break into print, there will always be desperate men willing to have a shot at disparate books that, the editor falsely claims, "ought to go well together."

Most of Orwell's fictional heroes are impoverished, and (like Charles Dickens and George Gissing) he puts a great deal of emphasis on money, or the lack of it. In August 1941, when he took a job at the BBC and earned a salary of £640 a year, for the first time since 1925 he made more money than he had as a policeman in Burma. A writer like Gordon Comstock usually has to have another job. In "The Cost of Letters" Orwell, always the Socialist, states that a writer should ideally have £1,000 a year, which would enable him to live in reasonable comfort without joining the privileged class. He concedes that it's almost impossible to earn this income solely by writing books, and that a second occupation, useful for putting the author in touch with the real world, should be non-literary. He'd been strongly discouraged by his conventional family, who were horrified by his resignation from his secure job in the Burmese police, and recalls that "I had to struggle desperately at the beginning, and if I had listened to what people said to me I would never have been a writer."

Orwell's political point of view informed all his criticism and fiction. "Why I Write," his retrospective artistic credo, begins with a brief account of his early life, including a description of his first novel, *Burmese Days*, in order to explain his four great motives for writing: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. In a letter of 1938 he added, in amusingly cynical American diction, "pulling in the dough." He might also have mentioned, as he did in a review of John Galsworthy, "some minor trouble, sharpening his sensitiveness," that gave him the urge to write. He called the Spanish Civil War, in which he fought on the Loyalist side and was shot through the throat, the great turning point in his life. After that, every line of his serious work—and in his view no work could be serious without a political purpose—was written "*against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism," and transformed "political writing into an art."

Orwell's Preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm* describes the genesis of his most humorous and wicked political satire. As in "Why I Write," he describes his background—including his five years with the police in Burma, association with the criminal class in Paris and warfare in Spain—to explain his political beliefs. His experience in Spain taught him about the great dangers to clear style and free thought: "how easily totalitarian propaganda can control the opinion of enlightened people in democratic countries." His duty, he felt, was to expose the illusions created by such propaganda, make people "see the Soviet régime for what it really was" and destroy the Soviet myth in order to revive the real Socialist movement. Inspired by seeing a little boy whip a huge farm horse, Orwell imagined a revolution of oppressed beasts and analyzed "Marx's theory from the animals' point of view."

Orwell's witty and ironic style is perfectly suited to his political allegory of the Russian Revolution. In *Animal Farm* the actual writing of political slogans takes place after the revolution. "All animals are equal" has suddenly been changed to "ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE

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EQUAL THAN OTHERS." The most famous phrase in his fable, rewritten by the shrewd, self-serving pigs, combines Thomas Jefferson's fundamental concept in the Declaration of Independence, "all men are created equal," with Eve's command to the serpent in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "render me more equal, and perhaps,/ A thing not undesirable, sometime/ Superior." The defeat of the Loyalists in the Spanish War taught him that "history is written by the winners." His own minimal achievement, while working as a talks producer at the wartime BBC, was to keep "our propaganda slightly less disgusting than it might otherwise have been."

In a 1946 review of a book by the novelist Georges Bernanos, Orwell, always ready to expose poor style, noted: "a tendency towards rhetoric—that is, a tendency to say everything at enormous length and at once forcibly and vaguely—seems to be a common failing with present-day French writers." His classic essay "Politics and the English Language" opposes this trend and forcefully advocates clear language. Orwell's ideas were foreshadowed by *Leviathan* (1651), the major work of the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes, who had also attacked the abuse of words, argued that a sane, stable society must have a clear, stable language and believed that pure style was not only good in itself but also a civic duty. Writing during the English civil war, in an elegant and balanced style, Hobbes insisted that clear words benefited society while confused and confusing style could lead to seditious disruption:

> The light of human minds is perspicuous words, but by exact definition first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity; reason is the pace; increase of science, the way; and the benefit of mankind, the end. And, on the contrary, metaphors, and senseless and ambiguous words, are like *ignes fatui* [delusions]; and reasoning upon them is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their ends, contention and sedition, or contempt.

Hobbes also observed that the misuse of words and creation of meaningless speech —the subject of Orwell's essay—were intended to deceive rather than enlighten readers.

Orwell's six stylistic rules are worth repeating:

> i. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
> ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
> iii. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
> iv. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
> v. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
> vi. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

He convincingly concludes that in his time "political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible." Like Hobbes, he fervently believes that political chaos is connected to the decay of language.

In his "Imaginary Interview" with Jonathan Swift, published in the *Listener* of November 1942, Orwell said that "*Gulliver's Travels* has meant more to me than any other book ever written. I can't remember when I first read it, I must have been eight years old at the most, and it's lived with me ever since so that I suppose a year has never passed without my re-reading at least part of it." Swift, a major influence on Orwell's ideas about writing, also wrote two important essays about the need to preserve clear style and eliminate corrupt language. In "On Corruptions of Style" (1710)—essential reading for anyone who wants to write good prose—Swift, like Hobbes, followed the tradition of English plain style. He attacked senseless, convoluted "wit" and condemned "words and phrases that are offensive to good sense."

In his "Letter to a Young Gentleman, lately entered into Holy Orders" (1721), Swift, an old gentleman in holy orders, ex-

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pressed his clearest ideas about style, which he classically defined as "Proper Words in Proper Places." (In "New Words" Orwell, echoing Swift, defines good style as "taking the right words and putting them in place.") Swift emphasized clarity, particularly disliked the "use of obscure terms," and urged the young clergyman to address his congregation "in a manner to be understood by the meanest among them."

In 1942 Orwell wrote that "Kipling is the only English writer of our time who has added phrases to the language." But in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell also invented many vivid phrases: "Big Brother Is Watching You," "two minutes hate," "thought police," "thoughtcrime," "facecrime," "doublethink," "memory hole," "vaporized," and "unperson." These words, which uncannily expressed the ideas and emotions of people living under totalitarian oppression, read like advertising catchwords and have become political shorthand.

Most of Orwell's essays on writing—particularly "New Words," "The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda," and "Politics and the English Language"—prefigure the ideas that he dramatized in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Fond of making political prophecies and honestly willing to admit his mistakes, Orwell urged readers to keep a diary—as Winston Smith does in the novel—not only to recover and preserve the past, but also to maintain an accurate perspective on the truth: "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle. One thing that helps towards it is to keep a diary, or, at any rate, to keep some kind of record of one's opinions about important events. Otherwise, when some particularly absurd belief is exploded by events, one may simply forget that one ever held it."

Like Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Winston Smith is absorbed into the hateful system he'd once opposed, and expresses his anxiety in two kinds of composition. He professionally destroys the work of others while secretly writing his own work. In his job Winston alters the records of the past to fit Party policy. In private, he writes on the creamy paper of an old diary with an old-fashioned pen and ink. The first kind of writing (like Orwell's at the BBC) is mechanical and exhausting, the second (like Orwell's own creative writing) is psychologically liberating, but also sets off disturbing memories and dreams. The first is systematic lying in Newspeak, the second a passionate search for truth in Oldspeak. Orwell contrasts the mindless, bureaucratic attitude Winston needs to do this work with his panic at the blank sheet of paper, his poor handwriting, his mental and emotional confusion when he starts writing for himself. Winston's work forces him to practice "doublethink," the ability to hold simultaneously two contradictory opinions which cancel each other out. Winston has to believe that he's rectifying errors, yet also knows that he's falsifying information. Each kind of writing forces him to find a plausible formula to disguise the truth. Winston is manipulated by the system and, in his role of Outer Party intellectual, is also part of the system that manipulates others.

Political reporters constantly employ the word "Orwellian." Though it stands for the kind of oppressive totalitarian regime he created in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is now used chiefly to mean political manipulation of language to deceive the public. But we need to reclaim the term's positive meaning, to suggest the bravery and idealism, the stubborn effort to be honest, in Orwell's life and art. For him serious writing had two essential aspects. First, an individual writer (like Winston Smith) sits down alone—with courage and an optimistic belief in his own ideas—to communicate his most secret thoughts to an unknown future reader. Second, his dedication to truth, the product of independent thought, has the power to improve society. In our time, we desperately need Orwell's clear language, his commitment to aesthetic as well as moral responsibility.

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New poems
by Debora Greger & Charles Edward Eaton

Taxi to Stonehenge

I passed a window full of televisions
as gray as British bankers,
though imported.
And there in England I saw
the twin towers of its former colony
crumble like toys made of fire
and brimstone,
the enormity of it more
terrible, reduced to fit in a living room.

Were we the only Americans in Bath
that November? So insisted
the taxi driver
winding his way to Stonehenge.
And there stood the stones just over a rise
As if just yesterday, back
in the Iron Age,
some first farmer had tried
to clear a field so he could plant it.

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And there they still sat as if over the hill
would yet come a last wagon,
two centuries late,
and men to complain how hard
to break off a piece they could carry away.
For what earthly use was this folly
to the eighteenth century?
There were great houses to be built.
For the newly rich lived lives made sweeter

by ships full of trinkets bound for the Gold Coast
and then, with human cargo,
for the New World.
Bales of cotton staggered
onto Bristol dock—O sprigged muslin-to-be,
O spring frocks! Jane Austen,
does your ghost
ever range this far from Bath on its walks?

If so, I apologize. I wore last year's coat
that chilly British morning.
It wasn't enough.
But the stones were dressed
in lichen even older. We walked the circle
of path that kept the henge
safe from our touch.
We walked it again. How many
had died to stand the stones there?

—Debora Greger

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Chekhov for children

She was in mourning for her life,
Masha loved to announce, borrowing a line
from another play. With a swirl of black skirt,

she'd hurl herself into the arms
of an overstuffed chair in the dressing room.
Was it a line you had to be too young to say?

Who knew we'd never hear of that actress again,
who wore out a handkerchief in her grief?
I was handed a wad of shredded silk,

though in that Midwestern *Three Sisters*
I was the fourth sister, the one in the black clothes
of a stagehand, who hid behind a folding screen

waiting for Olga, the one who taught school.
Out of a corset and into a nightgown
I helped her to change, as if into spinsterhood,

without her missing a cue. There might be a fire
burning in town—she'd call that peace,
for want of a better word. O Iowa City,

Athens of the corn fields! Those young women
stuck in the provinces pined for Moscow
as if for New York, or at least Chicago.

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Perhaps even Cedar Rapids with its tiny airport
would do. Me—I'd never been so far east before.
I stood in the wings waiting, I thought,

to relieve the colonel of a greatcoat as heavy
as his marriage so he could philosophize
about the future. He was about to be ambushed

by love. A freight train whistled, cutting through campus.
There was a sudden chill: someone backstage
had stealthily opened a door on the world

painted out in our absence. Nothing moved.
On a cherry tree that had dared to bud,
in silent fury a late snow fell.

—Debora Greger

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The work of the sun

Verlaine said the poem slowly rises like the sun,
Spreads over the landscape, a bird that hovers,
Moves on to find and bless a pair of lovers:
The work of the sun is never done.

It loves the still, ardent, and the physical—
The house is closed—it climbs the stair,
And leaves its shaded footprints everywhere:
The always prowling word is never finical.

A vast impressionist, it mixes palettes—
You think you have the sunlight captured on a nude,
But it never meant to stay too long or brood—
Clouds pass by, and in a moment it forgets.

It dawdles with the minatory and the minuscule,
Spotlights a hidden bruise, a scar beneath the brim:
Someone beaten, slashed—Her or Him?
A realist as well, it does not join with any school.

Random rover, it wants to get most things just right—
Some days I feel it heating liquid in my pen,
The sunlit river flows a while and then
Lovers leave my land, an evening bird takes flight.

After all, the magnum opus came to grips
With crimes of passion, soft caresses,
Things picked out by starlight which it barely blesses—
Something put a hand upon the sun and sealed its lips.

—Charles Edward Eaton

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Letter from Cambodia

History by other means

by Anthony Daniels

When a graceful, smiling Cambodian waitress expresses the hope, in the imperative mood, that you enjoy your breakfast, you can't help wondering what she means by it, if anything at all. Can it really matter very much in a country with a recent history such as Cambodia's whether or not a visitor enjoys his breakfast? (As a matter of fact, I did).

Of course, daily life has to go on, even after a catastrophic historical experience. Indeed, such an experience is soon forgotten, in the sense of not being present in the mind all the time. For example, I recall the time I crossed into Germany from France with my mother. It was nearly thirty years since my mother had fled Germany, and the same period of time had elapsed between the end of the war and then as between the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge and now; and, having sworn never to return, it was the first time she had been back. In those days, there were still borders and border guards in Western Europe, and on the German side they found it puzzling that a person such as my mother, who was born in Berlin, should be traveling on a British passport. They had a discussion between themselves about it, and appeared not to be able to think of any explanation at all of this curious circumstance. I hasten to add that they were clearly not stomping Nazis.

The physical grace and delicacy of the Cambodians, and their friendly good humor, sits ill with the abysmal brutality of the Khmer Rouge, and raises questions akin to those raised by stories of concentration camp commandants who wept over *Winterreise* after a hard day's genocide. But if westernization proceeds too far or too fast in Cambodia, the puzzle will dissolve itself: there won't be much physical grace left to puzzle the observer. In neighboring Bangkok, I was astonished to see how fat and lumpen many Thai children, at least of the middle class, had become. They seem, from the moment they are released from school, to need to eat their own body weight in two hours, like insectivorous shrews. Lacking the shrews' high metabolic rate, however, they quickly grow fat, and many of them waddle rather than walk. Gone is the almost feline elegance of South-East Asia.

How easy it is to take physical grace for a sign of every other virtue! (Mary McCarthy certainly did it in her book called *Hanoi*.) The apparent gentleness of Cambodian life in Sihanouk's time fooled many sympathetic onlookers into supposing that they were observing a near-paradise. François Bizot, the French anthropologist and scholar of South-East Asian Buddhism, who was twice a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge (including of its most notorious jailer and torturer, the former mathematics teacher Deuch), and who has recently published a memoir called *The Gate*, remembered the pre-Lon Nol, pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodians as a people infused with a Buddhist sense of proportion, content with the unceasing regularity

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of the rural round, with its celebrations, festivals, and comforting changelessness. Not for them the snares and delusions of progress and ever-increasing material consumption that never satisfies, whatever its level. They were wise where we westerners were merely clever.

Was it ever really thus, or has the horror that overtook Cambodia lent a roseate glow to memories of a prelapsarian country? Bizot is certainly not the only one to remember it like this: almost everyone who wrote of Cambodia at the time experienced the same *douceur*.

No doubt this roseate view of things captured an aspect of Cambodian reality, but only an aspect. Paradise is not of this world. Sihanouk was not above a little political murder, and political murder does not take place where there is no conflict. Moreover, as soon as the Cambodian peasants were offered what they mistakenly thought was an opportunity to escape their rice paddies, by means of education, to obtain a job in a government office with an air-conditioner or even just a ceiling fan, they did so: despite the unrivalled tender green of young rice plants. To slosh about all day—all life, in fact—in rice paddies is evidently not as romantic as it looks.

Needless to say, anything was and is better than the Khmer Rouge, either in prospect or retrospect. Books about Pol Pot and his regime are everywhere, in large quantities, just to remind people of the fact. I haven't seen anything comparable since I visited the Dominican Republic, where within a day or two I had accumulated a small library of books about the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Compared with Pol Pot, of course, he was a humanitarian, a mere amateur of mass murder: but he was the subject of the same proportion of books sold.

Where did the ferocity come from in Cambodia, a country regarded as gentle as Germany was once reputed to be civilized, or Japan was once reputed to be refined? Every time a Cambodian smiled at me, welcoming me with a graceful gesture, I wondered whether, secretly, he hated me with an inextinguishable class or national hatred.

Leaving aside the permanent human propensity to commit as much evil as can be got away with, there are those who see the ferocity of the Pol Pot years as emerging from specifically Cambodian tendencies and characteristics; and there are those who emphasize its roots in an intellectual doctrine, or at least in an intellectual tradition, namely Marxism-Leninism and its Stalino-Maoist sub-variants.

The historiographical difference is similar to that to be found in explanations of the disastrous trajectory of the Soviet Union. Was it Russian or was it Marxist? If you read the Marquis de Custine, you can't help but be struck by the many parallels between the Russian of Nicholas I and that of the Soviets. Still, the Soviets killed more people for political reasons in a hundred days than the Tsarists managed in a hundred years. Here, if anywhere, is an illustration of one of the three great laws of dialectical materialism, the transformation of quantity into quality. The water of Tsarism turned into the ice of Marxism.

The great exponent of the view of the Khmer Rouge as continuers of Cambodian tradition is the historian Michael Vickery. In his standard book, *Cambodia 1975–1982*, he denies that the Pol Pot regime was qualitatively different from anything that had gone before in Cambodian history. To prove his point, he cites anecdotes from pre-Khmer Rouge days illustrating the propensity of the Cambodians, despite their superficial gentleness, to spitefulness and cruelty. It doesn't seem to bother him that no one foresaw the outbreak of mass killing in Cambodia (as Dostoevsky did in Russia, if the revolutionary ideologues ever came to power), or that the history of every country in the world would provide evidence of the kind he adduces. His task, though, is not so much to rehabilitate Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge—that would have been beyond the powers even of the Webbs—as to "relativ-

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ize" them (to use his own term), and to demarxify them. Yes, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were worse than others, but not qualitatively so: the law of dialectical materialism is not valid in this instance.

An example of his "relativizing" is his treatment of the forced removal of Cambodians from Phnom Penh immediately after it fell. The population of the city had, of course, swelled enormously, to over two million, as a result of the American bombing of the Cambodian countryside. This was one of the least glorious episodes in American history, stupid, murderous, and ineffective, albeit carried out in the name of a good cause, that of halting the spread of Communism, the very opposite of what it achieved.

> It is a strange kind of history [wrote Vickery] which regards the displacement of people [by the bombing] as less abhorrent or more "normal" than the reverse movement of 1975.

Not only does this overlook a very real difference between the two population movements—that the move into Phnom Penh was spontaneous, in the sense that it was chosen by people in response to their circumstances, however horrible those circumstances, while the reverse movement was centrally decreed without reference to the wishes of anyone except the leaders—but it also overlooks the fact that the Khmer Rouge emptied all towns and cities equally, and abolished money and markets. It is preposterous to see the emptying of Phnom Penh as merely an exercise in reversing a previous, undesirable demographic trend.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Vickery's estimate of the numbers of excess deaths in Pol Pot's four years of power is lower by a million than that of other writers. But what he is really trying to do (for when numbers are so large, the exact figure hardly matters from the moral point of view) is to exculpate an entire ideology: the Pol Pot episode was merely the continuation of Khmer history by other means, and thus had nothing, or nothing much, to do with ideology. "The Cambodian revolution. was in contrast to any variety of Marxism, classical or revisionist." As also were the Russian, Chinese, Albanian, North Korean, etc., revolutions. So Marxists can sleep easy in their beds—Marxism is responsible for nothing, certainly not mass killing and starvation.

Most writers, though, take the view that without ideology, without the ideas that Saloth Sar (later Pol Pot) and his small group of associates picked up in Paris in the early 1950s, the history of Cambodia would have been very different and much less brutal. True, Cambodians have a record of brutality, perhaps even brutality of a particular kind—but is there any people that has not? Ideology raises brutality to a new level, and surely it isn't very difficult to see threads that connect Pol Pot's regime to other Marxist regimes, as well as to Marx himself.

This being the case, the visitor to Cambodia can begin to relax again. Maybe the Cambodian tradition has its flaws, maybe the country is not a full democracy and never will be; no doubt it is a very unpleasant thing to fall into the hands of the Cambodian police, who do not behave as they should. Maybe corruption is rife and the rule of law as we know it hardly exists. But the Pol Pot years really were different in point of brutality from all that preceded them, and were not the logical or inevitable outcome of purely Cambodian phenomena or developments. The charms of the Cambodian people are real charms after all, they are not a front for something else, they are not a screen for an unquenchable fire of hatred or a mask for national sadism. You can enjoy these charms for what they are, without having to agonize over their incompatibility with what happened twenty-eight years ago.

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Theater

Trumbos play the big parade

by Mark Steyn

Half a century ago, Carol Channing was offered the opportunity to take over from Rosalind Russell in the Broadway hit *Wonderful Town*. The first thing she did was request a meeting with the director, George Abbott, to discuss her character, to explore the role, to dig deep into "the soul" of Ruth Sherwood. "Who *is* Ruth Sherwood?" she asked.

"Ruth Sherwood is whoever plays her," said Abbott. "Do you want the job or not?"

Ruth Sherwood is whoever plays her: for a producer, that's the ideal—a property that isn't constrained by casting. Wherever you live in the English-speaking world and much of the rest, no matter how small your nearest theater, chances are it's hosted some touring production of A. R. Gurney's *Love Letters* starring a couple of local celebrities, or near-celebrities. *Love Letters* is exactly what it says: a set of his'n'hers correspondence from a pair of lovers generic enough to be, in Abbott's words, whoever plays them. In little more than a decade, I've seen the play with everyone from legit heavyweights Colleen Dewhurst and Jason Robards to Ken Howard, formerly of "Dynasty," and Elizabeth Montgomery, the snub-nosed spellbinder of "Bewitched." The West End production was typical. Robert Wagner and Stefanie Powers, then starring as the husband-and-wife detectives of TV's "Hart to Hart," sat at a writing desk for two acts reading out letters—in Wagner's case, with head bent down and his hand guiding his eyes cautiously across the page. At the end, when Miss Powers rose to take her bows, it came as something of a shock after such a sedentary evening to see her incendiary Hollywood wiggle. It would be nice, one thought, to see her in a play where she had to walk about—or even stand up.

But that would have required learning lines and marks and entrances and so forth. And the point about *Love Letters* is that it dispenses with all that, which is why just about every middle-aged thespian you've ever heard of has at one time or another done a six-week run in the play somewhere on the map. Producers love *Love Letters* and would love to find another. To date, the only thing that's come close is *The Vagina Monologues*, where, casting-wise, if you've got a vagina, they'll give you a shot at the monologue. If you recall those far-off pre-9/11 days when Rudy Giuliani was dismissed as a discredited mean-spirited prostate-crippled love-rat not up to whupping Hillary in the Senate race, the first thing his missus did after moving out of Gracie Mansion was sign up for a stint as a vaginal monologist.

And now we have a third entry into this exclusive pantheon. By the time you read this, Nathan Lane will no longer be in *Trumbo*. He stayed at the tiny Westside Theatre barely long enough to read the reviews. Not for *Trumbo*'s marquee names the grueling six-week slog of *Love Letters*. No, sir, for this play, the idea is the big stars will sign for four weeks max.

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On the face of it, this seems a bit odd. *Love Letters* is about any old reasonably upscale couple, but *Trumbo* is about an individual: Dalton Trumbo, the screenwriter of *Spartacus*, *Exodus*, and *Roman Holiday*. It's not that Nathan Lane looks nothing like Trumbo. Many years ago, I wrote a piece for BBC Radio about Ring Lardner and we signed Stubby Kaye to play him: Lardner was tall and severe, Kaye was fat and jolly and, even for radio, known to be so; but there was a kind of mournful dignity to him that I felt suited the character. It's certainly possible that, despite their physical dissimilarities, cuddly Nathan Lane could convey the essence of Dalton Trumbo. But the producers are confident that any other Tom, Dick, or Harry can convey it, too. *Trumbo* is written by his son, Christopher Trumbo, who presumably knew his dad in all his particulars. But he's signed on to an arrangement in which his pop is an empty suit for whichever minor celebrity has a month to spare.

Why would he do this? Well, the answer comes when the lights go down, and the screens flanking the stage are filled by a huge photograph of John Parnell Thomas, Congressman for New Jersey's 7th District, 1937–1950, and, for the latter part of that period, Chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee. It was he who got to ask: "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" And he remains a potent enough bogeyman that, at the performance I caught, the sight of his portrait elicited boos from members of the audience. Just like an English panto. The important thing about *Trumbo* is not his screenwriting credits but his membership in the "Hollywood Ten." He served nine months in jail for contempt of Congress and thereafter was blacklisted.

So, although, as in *Love Letters*, Lane sits at a desk and reads Trumbo's correspondence, the real model here is *The Vagina Monologues*: Whatever the specifics of their experience, those women are every woman; their story is your story; by taking the role, you're expressing solidarity. That's what Nathan Lane is telling us: any artist can play Dalton Trumbo because Dalton Trumbo is every artist who's fought for freedom in a climate of repression. What could be timelier in the Bush-Ashcroft age of "the new McCarthyism" than a stroll down Memory Lane to the old McCarthyism? These days, TV, radio, newspapers, and awards ceremonies are full of stars giving long in-depth interviews about how they've been silenced, and most of them would be fine playing Dalton Trumbo: Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, Johnny Depp, Janeane Garofalo, all three Dixie Chicks, nude if necessary, a great army of celebrity Dalton Trumbos in all shapes and sizes marching on every dinner theater in the land: Seventy-six Trumbos play the big parade, with 110 more close behind. The Trumbo of *Trumbo* isn't a person but a brand: he represents the bravery of art and the price of courage. That's why, off to the side of the stage, the only other member of the cast, Gordon MacDonald, plays Trumbo's son as if he's an usher at a memorial service.

I can't quarrel with that. The McCarthy era was a rare moment in American history when the apparatus of the state took a formal interest in the opinions of actors, writers, directors, and producers. Fifty years on, when "blacklisted" means the morning man at a country radio station refuses to play your new CD because you badmouthed America while you were picking up an award in Europe, you can't blame the big-time stars for clinging to the retro chic of a period when their Great Thoughts prompted Congressional committees rather than late-night talk-show jokes. What's telling, though, is the fine line the play walks between Trumbo, the victim of HUAC, and Trumbo, the fellow who did whatever it was he did to catch HUAC's eye. The evening begins with excerpts from Trumbo's testimony to Congress, which is mainly a display of droll evasions: he says he'd like to answer the question but "I'd hate myself in the morning," etc. When a flatfooted hack

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pol meets a dexterous wit, it's no contest: The gavel bangs down, Trumbo is taken away, and his new life begins—unemployment, poverty, making do.

As a screenwriter, Trumbo wasn't known for his comedy skills, but the ninety minutes his son has cobbled together from his letters are a non-stop laugh riot. In exile in Northern California, Trumbo has no outlet for his literary skills other than replies to demands from local tradesmen: "Dear Burglars," he begins his missive to one contractor. Alerting another to the news that payment will be at least another sixty days, he signs off with, "Considering what you've done to me, I ought to make you wait the full nine months." The gleeful savagery plays better with the audience than it does with the recipient. In my experience, it's rarely worth composing a flamboyantly vicious letter to one's plumber, banker, telephone company, etc., because you just get the same old computer-generated auto-response as if you've sloughed off some incoherent monosyllables. Perhaps it was different fifty years ago. Nonetheless, although perfectly efficient laugh-generators, Trumbo's scathing wit has the faint whiff of boilerplate about it. Receiving a quote for installing a baby monitor, he responds to the company: "Your letter has arrived and been put to the only sensible use I could think of." This well-loved joke gets the laughs it always gets, though it's usually more neatly expressed. (Max Reger to a critic: "Your review is in front of me. It will soon be behind me.")

Of course, *Trumbo* is still, albeit tenuously, attached to the movie business, and it too has its petty bureaucrats. As he tells the Treasurer of the Screenwriters' Guild, "I have received your letter warning that I am now in jeopardy of being placed in bad standing for nonpayment of dues. I thought it rather loud and more than ordinarily witless, but to deny you these qualities would be to silence you altogether; and that, for constitutional reasons alone, I should not like to see happen." That gets big yuks from the audience, but I wonder if anyone less lovable than Nathan Lane could pull off that sweeping "more than ordinarily witless" without drawing attention to the effortless contempt for the little man contained therein. One would observe that the verbal pyrotechnics don't quite obscure the fact that as a rule Trumbo's in the wrong. True, one could say the same of his HUAC testimony, but it seems somehow more unpleasant applied to carpenters rather than Congressmen.

Lane is on surer ground when Trumbo's son leaves for college and a slice of fatherly wisdom somehow evolves into a riff on the perils of masturbation. This is the most sustained bit of business in the show, and Lane seizes it with gusto. It's not all a laugh riot—Trumbo suffers real economic hardship—but, even in the gags, there's an air of earnestness that the two actors and their director, Peter Askin, can never quite shake off. You can't help wondering whether, even far from Hollywood and without work, Trumbo's notes to the milkman were really the center of his existence, and, if they weren't, what's being left out to make room for them.

Right at the close, it's made explicit. In a eulogy for his old friend and fellow member of the Hollywood Ten, Ring Lardner, Jr.—son of the Ring Lardner mentioned above and also a jobbing writer—pays tribute to Trumbo as "wise, funny, greedy, generous, vain, biting, solicitous, ruthless, tenderhearted, devious, contentious, superbly rational, altruistic, prophetic, shortsighted, and indefatigable."

That man has been nowhere in sight for the previous hour and a half. Indeed, this is the play's only reference to the Trumbo you hear about if you talk to Hollywood oldtimers: a fellow who was famously impossible, not to say cruel. Of those qualities cited by Lardner, Trumbo's greed, vanity, and deviousness—to pluck but three—are airbrushed out of the picture. Even his epistolary forays against local businesses are presented as heroic. In my BBC days, I used to love what was then a staple of the cor-

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poration's radio output: letters back and forth between personages of various levels of distinction. But it's revealing that Trumbo consists for the most part of correspondence between the star of the show and a bunch of anonymous extras, little people we've never heard of and whom therefore we take the leading man's word for. For example, one of the most heartfelt moments is Trumbo's letter to his daughter Mitzi's school complaining that she's being insulted and ostracized because of him:

> This slow murder of the mind and heart and spirit of a young child is the proud outcome of those patriotic meetings held by a few parents, under the sponsorship of the P.T.A. and the Bluebirds. It is a living test of the high principles of both organizations—principles noble in word, ignoble and savage in application. The principles are what they say: Mitzi is what they do. I should like you to watch how decently and bravely our daughter tries to suppress her bewilderment at her first encounter with barbarism parading as American virtue. Barbarism which began at your school among adult persons.

But the dramatic power of this episode is drained by the fact that we have no clear picture of the other side: Even taking Trumbo at his son's estimation, a battle between a hero and a bunch of non-speaking parts is profoundly unsatisfying. Eventually, the play's lack of drama becomes so conspicuous one assumes it must be intentional.

What's missing from this picture? By way of comparison, let me offer the example of my old friend Diana Mosley, who died recently at the age of ninety-three, a victim of the Paris heatwave. In the Thirties, Diana got the hots for Fascism and Nazism: Hitler came to her wedding, she thought he had exquisite table manners, etc. When war broke out, the Government in Britain had her jailed as a possible security threat. After the war, she began a lifelong exile in France. She didn't kill anyone, she didn't take up arms against her country, but she never quite sufficiently regretted her youthful support for a totalitarian philosophy that proved to be genocidal. Although she was witty, charming, and a biographer of distinction, it would be impossible to imagine a play about Diana Mosley in which her enthusiasm for Nazism was not placed squarely at the center.

Like Diana, Dalton Trumbo didn't kill anyone or take up arms against his country. Like Diana, he went to jail and paid a price for being merely a youthful supporter of a totalitarian philosophy that proved to be genocidal. Though the play won't tell you the answer to that famous question—"Are you now or have you ever . . . ?"—the answer is: yes, he was. The more interesting question is: How do you feel about getting one of the great moral questions of the century wrong? I used to ask Diana Mosley that all the time and received a variety of answers which, however unsatisfactory, were never self-serving nor an attempt to stake a claim for victimhood. So how did Dalton Trumbo feel about appending his name to the sponsors' plaque on the bloodiest killing field of all time? Here's what he wrote to Albert Maltz in 1972:

> Whatever else may be said of Communists and the goals they pursued, I think you and I can agree that those who joined the Party were animated by a sincere desire to change the world and make it better, even at the cost of affiliating with an organization that had, from its beginnings, been subject to constant federal harassment, popular hatred, and sometimes physical violence. The impulses which caused them to affiliate with the Communist Party were good impulses, and the men and women who acted on them were good people.

So what? You could say the same of the Fascists and even of many members of al Qaeda. In the end, the impulses of the vast majority of Americans who declined to "affiliate" with the Communist Party were the better ones. But *Trumbo* wants us to accept its subject as a victim without giving us the context in which he became one. One might

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assume this is because Christopher Trumbo is a devoted son and wants to remind us that this man was not just a cause célèbre but also a loving father and happy homemaker. But Trumbo Jr. in other contexts is a very political animal. A couple of years back, when they gave an Oscar to Elia Kazan, he wrote a long piece in *LA Weekly* explaining why this was a shameful award: in other words, he has explicitly aligned himself with his father's cause.

Why then such a bland evasive bit of playmaking? Why reduce the subject to a slightly more irascible version of a 1950s sitcom dad—Gale Gordon parachuted into "Leave It To Beaver"? The subjects that truly animated Christopher Trumbo's father were not baby monitors and local builders, though, as a champion of the working classes in theory, his disdain for them in practice is all too typical. But Christopher understands that, if you scratch ever so slightly at the truth about his father, Nathan Lane and the stars in waiting would feel queasier about their four-week endorsements. After films like *The Front* and plays like *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been . . . ?*, this is surely the definitive take on Hollywood's McCarthy fetish: a play that simply junks the awkward stuff and uses it as a star-magnet for an evening of bland dinner-theater anecdotage. Wily and ingenious. And what a delightful summation of the situation: a show supposedly saluting a man who had the courage of his convictions has no courage and no convictions.

It comes as something of a relief to turn to *Edge* (at the DR2), a one-woman show in which Anjelica Torn (daughter of Rip Torn and Geraldine Page) plays suicidal Sylvia Plath on the last day of her life. This is the umpteenth Plath work by Paul Alexander: He's written a biography, an anthology, and now a play about her, and he's ready to do *Sylvia Plath on Ice* if it helps further the fans' favorite thesis—that her pa, Otto Plath, and her husband, Ted Hughes, killed her. As the poet wrote in her most famous poem, "Daddy":

> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face, the brute
> Brute heart of a brute like you.

For Paul Alexander, that's the beginning and end of it: Daddy and her Daddy-substitute husband drove her to suicide. And, though it's rather exhausting, his obsession at least ensures that *Edge* confronts its subject in all the ways *Trumbo* avoids. Still, for most writers, whether Dalton Trumbo or Sylvia Plath, other people are material. Daddy and "Daddy" are two quite different things, and the latter has at least as much to do with Sylvia's careful construction of her own myth as it does with the long-gone German father who died when she was eight. It's to Anjelica Torn's credit that, in an unshowy performance delivered in Plath's flat voice, she conveys what the script does not: the poet's responsibility for her fate.

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Art

Whither the psychodramas?

by James Panero

On March 17, 1960, the artist Jean Tinguely nearly set New York's Museum of Modern Art on fire. By all accounts it was a fabulous affair. The governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, was in attendance, as was the rest of the city's elite, a black-tied assembly packed into MOMA's Sculpture Garden for an eagerly awaited evening. Around them bristled the cables and camera lenses and stenopads of the world's press. The occasion marked a climax for the young Tinguely, a principal member of the French art movement *Nouveau Realisme*, which he formalized back in France later that year; Tinguely had arrived in New York some months earlier to set up a studio under the auspices of Peter Selz within the Buckminster Fuller dome then sprouting in the museum's garden. Yet this evening was equally significant for the throngs of the New York art world. It meant for them, finally, an affirmation of international arrival. No longer would New York play second fiddle to Paris. Even if the honor of "cultural capital" had been bestowed on New York, de facto, some twenty years before, here in the spectacle of the evening was a signal event of the transfer. The Frenchman Tinguely's creation was titled *Homage to New York*.

Homage was what you might call, if you can call it anything, a self-destructing assembly of junk. Tinguely had requisitioned fifty bicycle wheels, motors, horns, smoke bombs, stink bombs, and a piano, among other pieces of urban detritus, for this one-shot machine. When set in motion, *Homage* could not have performed better. Out of a riot of smoke, noise, and turning gears, a can of gasoline tipped onto a candle burning in the old piano. As the piano went up in flames, a carriage—itself now in flames—shot out from beneath the piano and zeroed in on the audience. It skipped over a camera bag and lodged within a ladder used by a correspondent from *Paris-Match* (there's always something in a name). The reporter stepped down, turned the carriage around, and sent the device skipping into the NBC sound equipment. At this point Tinguely's circus act was shut down by the fire marshall, but the artist had done the trick. *Homage* encouraged Marcel Duchamp to remark: "we're going to drown in a sea of mediocrity. Maybe Tinguely and a few others sense this and are trying to destroy art before it's too late."

Kingsley Amis once famously said that the problems of the twentieth century could be summed up in the word "workshop." If so, a runner-up must be the word "strategies," at least when not used in the context of a military campaign. One popular textbook on modern-contemporary art, now in wide circulation, is called *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*. Its author, Jonathan Fineberg, singles out three people in his acknowledgments as the "greatest teachers of my life": the art critic Harold Rosenberg, the artist

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Cristo, and Fineberg's father, a psychoanalyst. For Fineberg, as for his mentor Rosenberg, modern art is the *act* of playing out a sociopolitical "strategy." The cover of Fineberg's textbook features not works of art but artists at work: Joseph Beuys muttering into a microphone, Jackson Pollock dripping paint, Cristo barking orders, Robert Rauschenberg on roller skates, and so forth (the textbook also features a long section on Tinguely's *Homage*). The difficulty posed by Fineberg's treatment of art, which by now emits the odor of doctrine, is how wrongheaded it sounds to anyone, outside of the creepy cathouses of postmodernism, who appreciates art for its beauty and raw power, as well as to any artists who are compelled to create rather than destroy art in the mode of Tinguely or Duchamp. Worse yet, however, is how Fineberg's narrative both overlooks and discounts a generation of modern artists who were not operating within and refused to comply with this mock-heroic "stategy of being." Such artists are defined by their art, instead of their art being defined by them.

One of the few artists with whom Tinguely had an audience while in New York was the junk sculptor Richard Stankiewicz (1922–1983, pronounced Stang-KAY-vich), then working in a studio downtown. At the meeting, Stankiewicz put Tinguely in touch with his Canal Street junk dealer. One of Stankiewicz's pieces, called *Model for a Monument* (1960), also went on to serve as a model for Tinguely's flaming carriage, now preserved in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Tinguely regarded Stankiewicz as someone who "glorified what [was] destitute, outlawed, and disreputable" and who "exerted the greatest influence on [my] work." The American is considered a forebear of the *Nouveau Realisme* movement, for which he receives in Fineberg's *Art Since 1940* a few lines of credit. Yet nothing in Tinguely's breathy pronouncements or in Fineberg's hopes for a high-art/low-art showdown seems to explain this special and largely forgotten artist, even if his sculptures resemble, superficially, the work of his junkyard contemporaries.

This is something that many people will get to see for themselves—probably for the first time—as a new exhibition out of Phillips Academy called "Miracle in the Scrap Heap: The Sculpture of Richard Stankiewicz" makes the rounds.[1] The title comes from a remark made by Sidney Geist. It hints at the creative and transfigurative power of Stankiewicz's work. Stankiewicz is not someone who easily fits in the Fineberg school of art history, and goodness knows we're the better for it. Stankiewicz, in fact, pursued something of an opposite artistic "strategy" from Tinguely. Rather than leaving behind charred bicycle wheels, Stankiewicz took worthless industrial castoffs and breathed life back into them; he gave rusty boilers and pipe fittings biomorphic and anthropomorphic characteristics; he made them amusing; he positioned figures in dioramas with titles like *Family Portrait*; he imbued disregarded things, if you can say this, with a sense of dignity. In the junk piles of Canal Street, Stankiewicz saw the glimmer of humanity staring back at him. This humanism, divorced of the political impulse, is precisely what put Stankiewicz at odds with the ironies of pop art and the cool sophistication of minimalism, both coming down the pike by 1960. Stankiewicz became, you might say, a medievalist working in a postmodern world.

Fairfield Porter, a longtime champion of

1 "Miracle in the Scrap Heap: The Sculpture of Richard Stankiewicz" was on view at AXA Gallery, New York, from August 15 to September 21, 2003. It was previously on view at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, from April 19 to July 30, 2003. The exhibition will be shown at The Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, from April to July 2004 and the Museum Jean Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland, from September to November 2004. A catalogue of the exhibition, with an essay by Emmie Donadio, has been published by the Addison Gallery of American Art (175 pages, $39.95).

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Stankiewicz, wrote of his 1953 exhibition at Hansa Gallery, at 70 East Twelfth Street, that his sculptures "show that life is stronger than the machine." Schooled in the modernist tradition by Hans Hofmann, Stankiewicz's work took on a naive and special tenor in the wake of the postmodern castoffs that have passed for art in the last few decades. Fed up with New York and relocating to rural Massachusetts in 1962, Stankiewicz became the Dogon of the Rust Belt and an insider who became an outsider, as far as the art world was concerned.

It is the period of output in the 1950s and early 1960s, before the challenge of minimalism encouraged Stankiewicz to go larger and strip his work down, that comes off as the artist's most confident and most idiosyncratic. This is the small-scale New York-era production at the heart of the current retrospective, as well as what is on display at a concurrent exhibition at Zabriskie Gallery. Since picking up Stankiewicz in the early 1970s, Zabriskie has doggedly and singularly promoted him in New York with a number of small shows.[2]

A work from 1953 called *Tribal Diagram* matches an assembly of pipe fittings with sprigs and blossoms of dancing wire in a way that is somehow understandable as a model in scale. A model of what, exactly? Well, that's not altogether certain, only that there exists the potential for something larger, as though the pipes represent a junkyard infrastructure with the wires of tiny men and women swaying on the scaffolds. This *Diagram* you might say provides a precis to Stankiewicz's entire sculptural program in the 1950s, with each assembly to follow serving as a portrait of life in this mythology: *The Bride* (1955) (with chicken wire as a veil), *Urchin* (1955), *Warrior* (1956), *City Bird* (1957), *Machine People* (1958). In *Middle-Aged Couple* (1954), an exhaust manifold has been paired with a dapper stovepipe, hinges serve as eyes and mouth, and a doorlatch hangs from the neck of the left figure like a pocketbook or camera, while a slender chain hooks into the right figure like that of a pocketwatch. The crudeness of materials is there for us to see, yet the shapes appear formal and posed, chaste and solemn, as though these were ordinary folk going about their daily lives and not the superstars of the junkyard world. The best work, such as the simple *Chain People I* (1960) (rusty boiler clothed in the textiles of straight, sash, and roller chains), is presented in documentary form, as though here was the anthropological evidence of a strange civilization. The results are sweet and affecting. Stankiewicz was largely ignored in his own century, yet he still has so much to teach about perceiving the shape of things around us.

One artist who has carved out a nearly opposite professional existence from that of Richard Stankiewicz is the painter Ellsworth Kelly. Born just a year after Stankiewicz, in 1923, Kelly approaches the closest thing we have now to a living master, which isn't saying a whole lot, but it is saying something. He recently celebrated his eightieth birthday, and he stays active and entertains himself by, among other things, writing letters to the architecture critic Herbert Muschamp of *The New York Times*. One epistle, over plans for the World Trade Center site, sent Mr. Muschamp's heart so completely aflutter in the Sunday, August 31 "Arts & Leisure" section that Kelly's gesture ranks as inspiring the only amusing occurrence ever to come out of September 11.

I don't think it would be unfair to suggest that Kelly has been clever and media-savvy with his career all along, carefully withholding his artistic intentions, navigating through the waters of formalism, minimalism, op art, and pop art for fifty years, without ever settling for one camp or another.

Although most people have labeled him a minimalist, as did Muschamp, there's always been something more intuitive and less programmatic and conceptual about Kelly's

2 "Richard Stankiewicz" opened at Zabriskie Gallery on September 9 and remains on view until October 18, 2003.

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work than the mainline minimalisms of Donald Judd, Carl Andre, et al. Plus, Kelly's colorful and often appealing work looks frankly too good for the typical gloom of minimalist structures.

Media-savviness alone does not a bad artist make, and through his career Kelly has quietly produced work that often stands the test of time; at certain moments, he has even created important works of an era. Such is the case with his series of color experiments that makes up the exhibition "Red Green Blue—Paintings and Studies, 1958–1965" organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and now on view at New York's Whitney Museum.[3] This show is so visually arresting, so imperious toward the senses, that to suggest Kelly is not here, first and foremost, a rigorous and serious artist concerned with the electric potential of formal issues is to miss out on the big picture.

In his catalogue essay, Dave Hickey recounts how Josef Albers lodged an early complaint of one of Kelly's painting: "Albers looked at the painting for a while and pronounced it a failure because the abutted yellow and white panels lacked sufficient contrast to occlude the line between them. That line, Albers said, ruined the painting." If Kelly has had his own "strategy for being" since then, it has been an attempt to contain as much of the history of art, including the movements of contemporary art—even the colors of advertisement and graphic design—within the borders his work. At the same time he has "occluded the line" and blurred his political boundaries in order to (in Hickey's plodding words) "elude the increasingly Balkanized, analyzed, subdivided, and historicized categories of modernist practice by an appeal to the more complex but essentially unitary attributes of our experience in the presence of modern art."

If not all of Kelly's works have succeeded visually as well as the 1958–1965 color experiments, especially the more staid, all-over color panels of later work, it is because here Kelly allows us our fullest access to a formalist narrative without the obfuscation and smoke-and-mirror devices of minimalism, such as painting out the sides of his canvases, which he borrowed just a couple years later. We can detect a visual narrator puzzling out and pulling us through his visual riddles, setting out the primary colors red and blue against the tensions of green, and at the same time toying with our expectations of blue as background and red as foreground. Kelly routinely positions the colors of Miró in reverse, blue over red.

What follows in the fifteen or so large canvases, as well as the numerous prints and works on paper—sometimes newsprint and old envelopes that served as his many test sheets—is a color suite with variations in weight and mass. Kelly uses and plays with our simple visual assumption that concave shapes are plastic and foreground, and that shapes bleeding over the canvas edge are background: for example, the green and blue lozenges of *Green Blue Red* (1964), positioned within a field of red, conflict with our expectations of red as foreground (especially along the red-blue border) and at the same time generate a disharmony at the red-green line, playing against an already uneasy pairing. On paper it sounds confusing, but our eyes instantly understand this as a challenge, and it is this challenge that drives us through the show and leads us to anticipate a resolution, or at least the clues to a resolution, in the paintings to come. Hans Hofmann once said that "Good composition is like a suspension bridge—each line adds strength and takes none away." For Kelly the tension is there, even as his lines are obscured.

3 "Ellsworth Kelly: Red Green Blue—Paintings and Studies, 1958–1965" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on August 10 and remains on view until November 3, 2003. The exhibition was previously on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego from January 19 to April 14, 2003. It will be on view at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, from April 27 to July 27, 2003. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in conjunction with D.A.P. (128 pages, $49.95)

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Music

Salzburg chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Several months ago, I wrote of the Salzburg Easter Festival, younger cousin to the Salzburg Summer Festival, the granddaddy of all music festivals (if you don't count Bayreuth, I suppose, but that is a very special case). At Easter, the city is crowded, but you can move about with relative ease. In the summer, the streets and sidewalks are clogged, and you may be late on account of traffic: foot traffic. Salzburg is a popular destination, even aside from the festival, and people from all over seem happy to soak things in.

There is music constantly, of course, in an assortment of halls: the Grosses Festspielhaus and the Kleines Festspielhaus; the Felsenreitschule and the Mozarteum. The Grosser Saal of the Mozarteum is one of the most beautiful concert spaces on earth, all gilded and smart, like one of the Emperor's officers dressed for a ceremonial occasion. St. Peter's Church, too, is a concert venue, and it, too, is extraordinarily beautiful (though verging on the gaudy). I must say, however, that its acoustics are not ideal, certainly for a work like Mozart's C Minor Mass—never mind that it had its premiere in the church and has been performed in it almost annually since the festival was founded in 1920.

I should mention, further, another concert venue: Hangar 7 out at the airport. There we had the premiere of the Helicopter String Quartet by Karlheinz Stockhausen, featuring (yes) four choppers. In its almanac, the festival published an impassioned defense of this composer, particularly in light of his remark, after September 11, that the terrorists had wrought "the greatest work of art ever"—nay, "the greatest work of the whole cosmos." We are perpetually told that Stockhausen's words were misinterpreted; we are never told, as far as I have observed, what the correct—the exonerating—interpretation would be.

There is music on the streets, too, unavoidable and usually pleasant. Violinists play their standards; sometimes they have a device—a machine—that provides an accompaniment. Gypsy ensembles are common. I heard a balalaika group play a rollicking version of the Winter movement from *The Four Seasons*. There are even tea dances, a very and delightfully old-fashioned event at which couples (of a certain age) whirl gently around the floor. This is touching to behold.

Like the Easter Festival, the Summer Festival is a same-time-next-year happening, only more so. There is a man named George Sgalitzer—a Vienna-born American, long resident in Seattle—who has attended every festival since the very first performance, on August 22, 1920. (He did miss the war years.) That first performance was of *Jedermann*, a play by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, one of the founders of the festival. On August 31, 2003, Doctor Sgalitzer attended his thousandth performance in Salzburg—it

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was of Mahler's *Lied von der Erde*. He keeps logs of all the concerts and operas he attends, anywhere, and he remembers virtually everything anyway. To listen to him is to be wide-eyed.

I met another unusual person at the festival, a lady, born in Salzburg, into an old, old Salzburg family. She related that the four "most charming" men she had ever met were—get ready—Franz Lehár, Richard Strauss, Maurice Chevalier, "and my grandfather." You meet any number of interesting people at the festival, and some are apt to be "of noble birth," to use antiquated language. Duchess this, Baron that. At one point, someone said to me, "You're going to see *The Count of Luxemburg* on Thursday night, right?" I thought, initially, that she was referring to a person—but she was referring to the operetta by Lehár (one of the four most charming). An American inquired, one day, how many Hapsburgs there were in Austria. A lady—our old-line Salzburger, our list-maker—replied, "More than there are gas stations in America"!

The festival began, for me, with a couple of first-rate song recitals: one by Marjana Lipovšek, the other by Angela Gheorghiu. The evenings could not have been more different, just as the women could not be more different—except that they are both superb singers, and had superb outings. Lipovšek is a Slovenian mezzo-soprano entering the autumn of her career, or so it would seem. She is little known in the United States, which is something of a scandal, as she is an important singer. She had her debut at the Metropolitan Opera only last season—in *Elektra*, as Klytämnestra. Her performance was not only gripping, but unforgettably so.

She sang in Salzburg an all-lieder recital, from Schubert to Wolfgang Rihm, a composer of today. Accompanying her was Rudolf Buchbinder, a pianist with a biggish solo career. Lipovšek displayed an uncanny gift for communication, marrying text and music almost to perfection. Her Scene from *Faust* (Schubert) was positively harrowing, as she portrayed the Evil Spirit, Gretchen, and the chorus that tolls that poor girl's doom. She was equally compelling in "Erlkönig" (also Schubert), making a familiar—nearly too familiar—song something like new. Lipovšek occasionally lacked technical polish, tending to flatness of pitch, for example; but this mattered little, in the face of such musicality.

The Rihm selection was noteworthy. Lipovšek sang his *Lavant-Gesänge*, so called because they set poems by Christine Lavant, an Austrian poet who lived a very sad life (1915–1973) but who achieved considerable distinction in her art. Rihm wrote the songs three years ago, dedicating them to Lipovšek. They are gratifying to have, a worthy addition to a lieder repertory that has not stopped growing. The set is despairing and bleak, but now and then relieved. Rihm, in these songs, reminds me somewhat of our own—of America's own—George Crumb, in his sensitivity and ability to paint. Lipovšek went straight to the heart of the matter, and Buchbinder was respectable too.

Angela Gheorghiu is a singer one feels compelled to defend, although why such an excellent singer should need a defense is a mystery. People—critics and (other) crabs—like to dwell on her offstage divaness more than on her onstage achievements. Let her indulge in all the divaness she wants: She delivers in her singing, and even her antics should be welcome, contributing, as they do, to the lore of operatic life.

She began with two "antique" arias, one by Alessandro Scarlatti—"O cessate di piagarmi"—and the other by Gluck, "O del mio dolce ardor." She was emotional and operatic in these pieces, but thoroughly Baroque. Gheorghiu—rather like Lipovšek—has a musical and dramatic sense that cannot be taught, and cannot be lost. In addition, she boasts a technique that any sensible singer would kill for.

Her recital, as it progressed, was almost a pops recital, and rather old-fashioned: a throwback. Bellini songs, a Donizetti song, Verdi songs, the Gounod "Sérénade," "Les Filles de Cadix" by Delibes, some Bizet,

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Massenet's "Elégie"—this was the sort of program one used to hear but which fell out of favor. Victoria de los Angeles sang music like this, and I associate her with some of these very songs: "Les Filles," for example. Gheorghiu ended her program with a slew of Romanian items, paying homage to her roots. Her feel for this music was a joy to experience—but then, her feeling for most music is commendable. She gave five encores, each of them old-fashioned, including "Vai azulão"—the Brazilian song that was another de los Angeles favorite—and the Vilja from *The Merry Widow*. As she bade goodnight, the crowd was still screaming, with justice.

While we're talking about operetta (sort of), shall we move this chronicle to Bad Ischl? This is the summer home of the Emperor, about an hour from Salzburg. The Kaiservilla still stands, and the present archduke, and his family, occupy it. They conduct tours with patience, graciousness, and humor. There is also an operetta festival in town, whose schedule, in 2003, included *Die Fledermaus* (practically obligatory) and the aforementioned *Count of Luxemburg*. This was a fizzy, delightful show—talk about a throwback. It was waltzy, cancanny, alive. The cast, which was youthful, clearly had a ball, with one and all evincing real sympathy for the genre. They didn't condescend to the *Count*, but met it on its own, worthy terms. The stage director threw in everything but the kitchen sink: Streamers shot out into the audience, weight-lifters and bears paraded by, rich ladies walked rich-lady dogs, bellhops danced up a storm. Lovers and would-be lovers sang and acted through a zany plot that ended with everyone happy—including the audience.

I am not one who laments that the word "gay" has been altered, but that is exactly the word that should describe this evening in Bad Ischl.

Some opera proper, back in Salzburg? First, however, attend one concert at the Mozarteum, an all-Rachmaninoff evening. This was an inspired idea, serving to highlight a composer who, famous as he is, is often underrated. The program involved a pianist, a cellist, a violinist—and one of the top bass-baritones in the world.

The evening began with five Preludes from Op. 23 played by Alexander Lonquich, a German pianist. He perhaps did not show himself to best effect. The first prelude was that in F-sharp minor, and Lonquich did some terrible banging. He produced some of the ugliest notes you can hear from a piano. He provided no singing line whatsoever, which is ruinous to Rachmaninoff. The pianist had enough fingers to get through the virtuosic B-flat prelude, but he did not do so especially musically. In the G-minor prelude, his rhythm was loose—which practically negates this piece. It is not a Chopin nocturne (and even there, you don't want to be too loose). The C-minor prelude, with which this set concluded, was a muddle.

But the evening brightened—and the pianist improved as well. Boris Pergamenshikov came on to join Lonquich in Rachmaninoff's Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor. Pergamenshikov—like Marjana Lipovšek—is little known in the United States, but he is an outstanding musician, celebrated elsewhere as early as 1974, when he won the gold medal at the Tchaikovsky competition. (He soon emigrated to the West.) Pergamenshikov was exemplary in the Rachmaninoff sonata, an underappreciated work. He was consistently musical, playing Romantically but never soupily. He also played in tune, which is no small favor. In addition, he proved a faithful observer of rhythm. His sound was pleasing, having a certain roughness, a graininess—a Russianness, if you will. His lyricism in the slow movement was memorably beautiful. In all, he brought out both the sun and the shade of Rachmaninoff's sonata.

And as I indicated, Alexander Lonquich acquitted himself better in collaboration than he had by himself.

After an intermission came the *Trio*

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élégiaque No. 1 in G minor. This is a somewhat neglected work that—like the *Trio élégiaque* No. 2 in D minor—owes much to Tchaikovsky. Joining the two performers to whom we had already been introduced was Dmitri Sitkovetsky, a violinist who happens to be the son of Bella Davidovich, the distinguished Russian pianist. He offered a rather brawny sound, sort of matching Pergamenshikov grain for grain. The slow, slow ending of this trio was transporting, extremely well judged.

Then came the singing portion of the evening: Sergei Leiferkus in five songs, not counting encores (of which there were three). In these songs, we heard the Real McCoy, a true Russian singer wringing everything one can from Rachmaninoff and the texts he uses. The language—microscopically clear—was a treat to listen to, and Leiferkus sang with vocal correctness and musical ardor, in equal parts. He sent a resplendent sound through the Grosser Saal. And he has remarkable posture and presence—physical command—even for an opera star.

Leiferkus sang an unusual song called "Fate"—poem by Alexei Apukhtin—which plays off Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and its famous, ominous opening. An old woman (Fate) knocks on doors with her crutch: *stuk, stuk, stuk*. Leiferkus was arresting in his storytelling—chilling. Immediately after, he performed a song of a much lighter character: "Letter to K. S. Stanislavsky," which, as Professor Thomas P. Hodge of Wellesley explained in his program notes, is probably the most skillful singing telegram in history. Stanislavsky had an important evening at the Moscow Art Theater that Rachmaninoff, abroad in Dresden, was unable to attend. So he penned this song, appointing Feodor Chaliapin to sing/deliver it. It begins "Dear Konstantin Sergeyevich" and ends "Yours, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Dresden, 14 October 1908"—with a postscript: "My wife joins in my good wishes." A plain, plain text, but a deliciously charming song.

There were many admired low voices at this festival—Thomas Hampson, Ferruccio Furlanetto, Matthias Goerne, Dwayne Croft—but Leiferkus held his own, to say the least. This *Rachmaninow-Abend*, as it was billed, ended with the playing of the second *Trio élégiaque*. The composer had had a good evening, and so had these musicians.

Now for those operas: There were almost ten of them, including two given in concert performance—Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* and Richard Strauss's *Aegyptische Helena*. In the title roles were those in the world best equipped to fill them: Plácido Domingo and Olga Borodina as Samson and Delilah, and Deborah Voigt as Helen. There was also an opera by Hans Werner Henze—*L'Upupa*, a sort of fairy tale—that proved very popular with festival-goers. In fact, Henze was a conspicuous presence in Salzburg, as Benjamin Schmid—a local hero, a Salzburger—played a piece of his for violin and chamber orchestra, and the Camerata Salzburg—another local product, a period group—played a suite fashioned from a film score: *Der junge Törless* (1966).

Hogging the attention, however, was a trio of operas by the biggest local hero of all—Mozart. These were *La Clemenza di Tito*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. The productions conceived for these operas were "controversial," as we say. Often we say "controversial" when we fear to be less polite, or "judgmental." Many aspects of these productions were indefensible: crude, outlandish, insulting. Two of the operas—*Tito* and *Don Giovanni*—were directed by Martin Kušej, who is a crown prince of Salzburg (not literally): In 2005, he will become artistic director of the festival's drama department. His *Don Giovanni* was unveiled last year, his *Tito* this year. Forgive me, but I will pass over the direction—not because it is unimportant, but because . . . well, direction has become all too important, in this age of "director-driven opera." The likes of Kušej have quite literally stolen the show: from singers and conductors, and—more gravely—from composers and librettists.

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The German-Canadian tenor Michael Schade was Tito, and he was magnificent, though festival officials told us he was ill. I have compared him before, in these pages, to the immortal Fritz Wunderlich, and I am not inclined to retract the comparison. Appearing as Sesto was the Bulgarian mezzo-soprano Vesselina Kasarova. With her rich, dusky throat and her easy technique, she has moved to the forefront of mezzos—and this is an age bursting with them. The two sopranos were Dorothea Röschmann and Barbara Bonney, with Bonney, in particular, pure and lovely, as she is wont to be. (I might mention that she gave an excellent recital at the Mozarteum, the latter half of which featured operetta arias, to which she has devoted her most recent album.) A second mezzo-soprano was Elina Garanca, a young Latvian, who obviously has a major career ahead of her, as does Luca Pisaroni, the Italian baritone who sang Publio . . . and who also sang Masetto in *Don Giovanni*.

The star of that show, however—no matter what Kušej tried to do—was Thomas Hampson, simply the great Don Giovanni of our time. Indeed, he is one of the greatest of all time. In this hugely important part—not just to baritones, or bass-baritones, but to opera—Hampson is the embodiment of handsome evil. Everything that has to be conveyed about the Don he conveys, musically and otherwise. Donna Anna was sung by Anna Netrebko, the Russian soprano who is fast becoming a world pinup—though, fortunately, she is a capital singer as well. A German tenor named Christoph Strehl made an appealing Don Ottavio, and Isabel Bayrakdarian—the Armenian-Canadian soprano frequently seen in New York—was both delectable and effective as Zerlina. Commanding in the role of the Commendatore was Kurt Moll, the veteran bass who made his operatic debut in 1961. His authority is greater than ever.

The conductor for both *Tito* and *Don Giovanni* was Nikolaus Harnoncourt, the one-time early-music specialist who is increasingly asked to lead the Vienna Philharmonic (whose summer home Salzburg is). He was disappointingly limp and listless—in *Tito* in particular—but built a powerful ending of *Don Giovanni*. Harnoncourt's tempos are almost always on the slow side, frustratingly—slow tempi have become epidemic in Mozart. There ought to be a movement: for literal movement, a going forward.

Die Entführung was directed, not by Martin Kušej, but by another European enfant terrible, Stefan Herheim. This was the most "controversial" production at the festival—and the most objectionable. Beyond bawdy, it was vulgar; beyond imaginative, or unconventional, or experimental, it was sickly bizarre. Mozart had little place in this spectacle. And, unlike in the other two operas, there was not much good singing to compensate—the Blonde, Diana Damrau, and the Pedrillo, Dietmar Kerschbaum, being game exceptions.

Why not close with something beautiful? That annual performance of the Mozart C Minor Mass. I must say that I was somewhat handicapped, having heard, a couple of months before, in Carnegie Hall, the performance of this mass by James Levine and the Metropolitan Opera forces, with Heidi Grant Murphy and Susan Graham as principal soloists. That was a performance that scaled the heights. That of Ivor Bolton—the English conductor who led the Mozarteum Orchester Salzburg, the Choir of Clare College, and a solid quartet of soloists—did not. But still: This was the Mozart C Minor Mass, and in its home, St. Peter's! I have already crabbed about the acoustics of this historic church—but who am I, ultimately, to argue? I felt lucky to be present.

And I wager that most everyone feels lucky to be present, in Salzburg. We have our assorted gripes and crotchets. But, in a world that sprouts a new summer music festival on every block, Salzburg is still king. Its varied riches cause one and all to vow: Same time next year.

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The media

The wages of spin

by James Bowman

Like the legendary people who have lived beneath a roaring waterfall for so long that they can no longer hear it, media folk are by now so much accustomed to "spin," the language that they themselves have forced politicians to speak, that they can no longer hear it. Thus as Tim Russert interviewed Terry McAuliffe, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, on a recent Sunday morning on "Meet the Press," he pointed out to him that every one of the latter's predictions of Democratic victories in 2002 had turned out to be erroneous. Why then should we believe his sanguine picture of Democratic prospects in 2004? Here is what McAuliffe replied: "I am the national party chairman. I am not going to go on television, you know, three days before an election and say, 'Oh, no, Tim. No, Mr. Russert, we're not going to win these elections.' My job is the chief cheerleader of the party. We're going to win everything. That's my job."

There is an almost endearing quality to such unexpected honesty. Or there would be if it were not so shocking. As when someone candidly confesses that he has lied, our first thought is of the paradox: if you say you lied *then*, how do we know you're not lying *now*? In effect, McAuliffe was telling us that he *was* lying now—or at least that truth is no part of the concern of "the chief cheerleader of the party," which comes to pretty much the same thing. The admission also casts an interesting light backwards on his response to the charge of the Republican national chariman, Ed Gillespie, on the same show that the Democratic candidates for president were guilty of "political hate speech" for accusing George W. Bush of, among other things, lying. McAuliffe had replied, in essence, that the Republicans were guilty of making the same charges, or worse, against Democrats.

Most extraordinary of all, however, was the fact that bulldog reporter Tim Russert had nothing to say about any of this—neither the charge of "hate speech" nor the frank admission that respect for the truth was not in the job description of the Democratic National Chairman. Not for him any hopeless attempt to get to the bottom of who *was* lying, or using "hate speech." The ease with which he took such charges in his stride suggests to me that, although the media can put on a show of indignation at the idea that a politician may have lied when the opportunity suits for a story—as, for instance, the long-running story designed to suggest that President Bush lied about the Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq—really they accept the widely popular but utterly cynical view that "they all do it." If lying is, as Mr. McAuliffe so disarmingly put it, "my job," what is the point of making an issue of it?

But the seriousness of the charge of bad faith is no less because broad segments of the media have agreed to treat it as

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routine—or to tell us with a nudge and a wink that political "spin" is an allowable form of dishonesty. This is the lesson of what in Britain has been the big story of the past two months, the Hutton Inquiry into the suicide of Dr. David Kelly. For Americans, this story is what one of my favorite British magazines, *The Week*, calls "boring but important." Dr. Kelly was a civil servant and a prominent scientist with expertise in the field of chemical and biological weaponry who was identified as the principal source for a charge by Andrew Gilligan, a reporter for the BBC, that the British government had "sexed up" the intelligence data about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction in order to justify its support for the war.

Apart from his unauthorized meetings with Mr. Gilligan and other BBC journalists, Dr. Kelly's behavior was exemplary. At first he said he had no idea that he was the source for Mr. Gilligan's sensational story because its details bore no relation to what he had told him. Besides, Gilligan had claimed that his story was based on evidence supplied by a "senior intelligence source," which Kelly was not. When he realized that Gilligan's information, such as it was, had come from him—and, as it turned out, him only—he went to his supervisor and told all, which resulted in his being summoned to testify before a parliamentary committee where some rough handling and the prospect of more to come was widely supposed to have induced him to take his own life.

The inquiry, at the time of writing, has produced few surprises. We knew already that Mr. Blair's governing style, like that of every other democratic politician in the world today, relies heavily on "spin" or—precisely—the "sexing up," not just of intelligence data, but of every kind of data in order to sell its policies to a mass audience with little interest in the details of the information that goes into the making of policy decisions and less interest in the finer points of the arguments for and against those decisions. The real question to be answered was whether or not spin, in this case, amounted to dishonesty. As we have seen, the media either assumes that it does or pretends to be shocked at the very idea that it might, according as it suits their story. And we also knew already that the BBC's story, more or less from the beginning, was that the war was a horrible mistake and likely to lead to ghastly consequences—for which, therefore, there could hardly be a justification that was *not* dishonest.

When Gilligan took his conversation with Kelly and submitted it to a certain amount of "sexing-up" of his own, he thought he had the evidence for what he, along with so many others at the BBC, had known all along, namely that the war was terribly ill-advised. He was hardly the first in the Corporation to report the assumption as the fact, as we learned last spring from a leaked memo by its own defense correspondent, Paul Adams, which loudly complained that his editors' headlining of "small victories at a very high price" was "exactly the opposite" of the truth. The impact of Gilligan's report was due entirely to the assumption of scandal in the fact that the government had relied on a single, unreliable source which it had then proceeded to distort for its own purposes—an exact description of what Gilligan himself, but not (as it turned out) the government, had done. Ironies don't come much more piquant than that. But there were plenty more ironies ahead.

Of course, the BBC's pretence of finding the government's spin scandalous was revealed as bogus when it treated its own reporter's spin as a matter of no moment, and defended him in public. Behind the scenes, one or two of the Corporation's governors expressed reservations about what Gilligan had done, but the Director General, Greg Dyke, and the chairman, Gavyn Davies, tried to maintain the façade of unity. Like Mr. McAuliffe, Mr. Davies obviously saw himself as his party's cheerleader, a role in which it helped to be able to fall back on a spirited defense of the BBC's independence from government. He wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph* that

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> The dogged independence of the board in the face of intense pressure has driven some political figures close to distraction, such has been their determination to influence the editorial decisions of Britain's most trusted provider of news and current affairs. . . . The governors came to the view, during and after the war, that the BBC had upheld its traditional attachment to impartiality and the truth under almost intolerable pressures. I am proud of the news professionals who were responsible for this. Of course there were some individual errors along the way, but our audiences recognised that the trust they have always placed in the BBC would not be betrayed. . . . There is only one reason why the BBC has been able to build the trust of its audiences over so many years, and that is because it is emphatically not the voice of the state. Everyone in politics says that they would never wish to make it so, but sometimes their actions belie this. When that happens, the BBC needs its board of governors to stand up and say halt.

Spin doesn't get much spinnier than that. Who thinks that the BBC should be the voice of the state? No one. The point of disagreement isn't that the BBC should toe the government line, it is that it shouldn't campaign against it, and especially that it shouldn't campaign by reporting untruths. But Davies's tactic in answering such a serious charge is like that of the ruthless corporate chieftain in *Kids in the Hall: Brain Candy* who, when contradicted by an underling, asks: "Would you agree that Paris is the capital of France?"

"Well," says the bewildered underling, "yes, but—"

"Good. Then we're back in agreement."

As Barbara Amiel later wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, "If Parliament allows the BBC to represent the Kelly matter as a battle for its editorial independence rather than a fight for its relentless bias, the BBC will continue to substitute its own policies for those of the elected officials in determining the success or failure of foreign policy." Hers was a relatively rare voice, however. Most people in the British press simply assumed, like Tim Russert, that both sides were spinning and that nothing better could be expected of them. "The tragic death of Dr David Kelly has exposed serious institutional failings within the BBC and Whitehall," editorialized *The Times*. "If the original crime was a misdemeanour, the mishandling of it has become a serious offence. Lord Hutton needs to throw the net of his inquiry wide enough to consider the flaws in these important institutions which have a direct and profound responsibility to the public."

Though it was clear enough what the "institutional failing" in the BBC was, what was that of the government? *The Times* offered a hint. "The focus of public attention on whether the Government 'sexed up' intelligence to lead the country into war has been a serious distraction from a more important debate about the quality of the intelligence gathered before the conflict and the assiduousness of the government analysis of that intelligence." This is simply absurd. The newspaper assumes that it is the press's duty to "debate" such a matter, and thus that the press must be able to treat with the government on equal terms. But intelligence is the one area where that is self-evidently impossible. How on earth can journalists "debate" the quality of intelligence without being given full and unlimited access to it? And who seriously supposes that the press can in *any* circumstances be granted that? You might as well close down the intelligence services altogether and turn them over to the media.

The hopeless inadequacy of the media as a forum for debate of government intelligence reports is a reminder that, even if Kelly's evidence had been as Gilligan described it, the report would have been worthless because it would have been based on such partial information. If one intelligence analyst—which, remember, Kelly was not—actually *had* questioned the government's claims about the dangers posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass

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destruction, the fact would not self-evidently have discredited those intelligence analysts on whose evidence the claims had presumably been made in the first place. Given the whole sweep of intelligence data and the inner workings of government to which neither Gilligan nor Kelly had access, how could either of them possibly say anything to the purpose about them?

Perhaps because he recognized this, Gilligan subsequently elaborated further on his conversation with Kelly to report in the *Mail on Sunday* that it was not the intelligence services at all but Mr. Alistair Campbell, press spokesman to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who had inserted into one of Mr. Blair's speeches the claim that Saddam's Weapons of Mass Destruction could be deployed within forty-five minutes. Kelly, Gilligan's only source, completely disavowed having made any such statement before he died, nor would two other BBC reporters who had spoken with Kelly confirm it. But Mr Campbell, a former tabloid reporter who has since resigned, was very unpopular with large sections of the British media. Sometimes referred to as the government's "propaganda minister," he was thought to be "the king of spin," so his fury at the charge lodged against him by Gilligan was taken to be just more spin. Thus *The Times*:

> From the moment that Andrew Gilligan made his allegation that Downing Street had "sexed up" intelligence information, the Government handled the matter hastily and clumsily. Alastair Campbell has been a more than able prime ministerial aide, and the techniques of relentless pressure and vehement denial have frequently served him well.
>
> Whatever the merits of his case, and we have judged them strong, it is not sensible for the Prime Minister's chief press adviser to prompt a complete breakdown of relations between Downing Street and the nation's major broadcaster.

This is outrageous. Since when is the burden of maintaining good relations with the media solely the responsibility of government? If faced with a false and malicious charge—a charge made as part of a larger campaign by the media organization against government policy—does the government not have a responsibility vigorously to refute it? Who has decided that its duty to get along with the media organization takes precedence over the truth? Not the least of the ironies in the whole affair was that, wrongly accused of a shameful and dishonest act, Mr. Campbell reacted not like a spinner or a minister of propaganda, but with the fury of one for whom a strict regard for the truth was sacred. You can understand how the media might have asked itself, "Where does he get off . . . ?" After, all, it wasn't as if he had been accused of not being a good cheerleader.

If this were all, the rights and wrongs of the affair would be clear. Gilligan's reporting seems beyond a shadow of a doubt to be *wrong* with respect to the forty-five-minute claim. That being the case, what could the government have done differently than it did in resisting the false claim of wrongdoing laid at its doorstep? It seems beyond question that the blame rests primarily with Gilligan and the BBC for backing him up in a false report, secondarily with Kelly himself for exposing himself to being used in what he should have known was already a campaign on the part of the BBC against the British involvement in the war in Iraq and the government which had taken the decision to join it, and not at all with the government itself which, whatever its other faults, was guilty in this instance only of making the best case on the basis of the information it had for the decision to go to war.

But that was not all. There were still more ironies in the case. For having found itself in the unaccustomed position of championing the truth against the spin of the media, the government, and especially the defense minister, Geoff Hoon, proceeded to—spin! In particular, it first revealed, and then

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denied that it had revealed, that it knew Dr. Kelly was Gilligan's source. Given the seriousness of the charge that Gilligan had brought against it and the fact that the charge was entirely based on the testimony of a man who denied it, the government would have been justified in naming Kelly openly. Anyone who had blamed it for doing so would have been saying, in another way, that the government should not have taken the matter so seriously. Instead, by paltering and playing cat-and-mouse with the media, it laid itself open to the charge of having "betrayed" Kelly and so contributed to his death. As the *Sunday Telegraph* editorialized,

> Kelly was thrust into the limelight against his will. This quiet and academic civil servant was used by the Government as a weapon in its feud with the BBC. That in itself was outrageous. It is an indication of how far the Government has lost any priorities other than triumphing over those whom it believes to be its enemies. . . . Alastair Campbell was engaged in full-scale war with the BBC over Mr. Gilligan's report, which he insisted was a lie. He demanded an apology from the BBC. The BBC refused, and reiterated its absolute right to report the story. Both sides were, and are, convinced of their own glistening moral rectitude.

But it *was* a lie, and the fact that both sides are convinced of their moral rectitude, glistening or not, does not mean that one of them may not be in the right and the other very much in the wrong. The real scandal is that hardly anybody in the media seems to have recognized the seriousness of the charge, and thus the reason why Mr. Blair and Mr. Campbell behaved as they did. So common nowadays has become the charge of bad faith that to them it was, ho hum, just another accusation of government lying.

How little, not how much, was at stake for the BBC was revealed in its defense of Gilligan. What, after all, was the big deal? So he made a few mistakes. "There were some individual errors along the way," as Gavyn Davies put it. Just as Tim Russert wasn't in the least shocked by Terry McAuliffe's confession, so the BBC regarded in its own reporter as venial what in the government it had pretended to consider mortal. The reason is that nobody really knows what is meant by "spin." If it means only that a politician is making the best case he knows how for policies that he favors, then he not only has a right but a duty to spin. How else is anything to be done in a democratic society built on peaceful persuasion? But if it means lying, or fabricating evidence, it should be treated with utter contempt and execration and not winked at as an inevitable part of the political game.

Such confusion over the meaning of a word which, it must now be clear, is overdue for retirement is also responsible for the "political hate speech" complained of by Mr. Gillespie. If the idea of "spin" can comfortably accommodate within itself the idea of lying, then it is but a short step for a rival spinner to conclude, as several Democratic candidates and others on the left have done, that the Bush administration's spin is tantamount to lying. The press has learned to take such charges, and the factitious outrage with which they are brought, in its stride, but it should unlearn that lesson. Lying is a terribly serious—indeed, for a politician, a deadly—charge and not a trivial one. That Tony Blair for one has chosen to regard it as such and to that extent at least to emancipate himself from the political spin culture in which nobody is really expected to mean anything he or she says is a hopeful sign, in spite of the unfortunate death of Dr. Kelly to which that choice apparently led.

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Books

His secret life

by F. H. Buckley

James Thurber has been unlucky in his biographers, who have tended to like him overmuch or not or all. Their task might have been easier had the story had more drama, or had Thurber been born at a different time. He was too young for the Algonquin wits of the 1920s and too old for the literary Marxists of the 1930s. His crowd was the Hiding Generation, not the Lost Generation. He took refuge in his cartoons and stories, for which he sought inspiration from impossible love affairs and from Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. Almost forgotten today, he was the funniest American writer of his day.

Thurber is recalled in *Thurber Country*, a reissued collection of short stories (first published in 1949), and *The Thurber Letters*, an 800-page tome edited by Harrison Kinney.[1] For further reading, Kinney helpfully recommends "the definitive biography" by one Harrison Kinney. Put the two Kinney volumes together and they weigh in at over 2,000 pages, a bad joke to play on a comic writer who prized brevity.

We have been taught to think it a tragedy when a family destroys a writer's personal letters. Kinney's Thurber suggests that we should rethink this silly prejudice. Until he was forty Thurber's letters were mawkish and naïve, filled with an adolescent self-pity that makes the reader cringe. Thurber himself was under no illusions about literary letters. In the introduction to the collection of letters his wife edited, Thurber wrote "It is only when a man's letters are published after his death that they have any effect and this effect is usually only on literary critics." Summarizing his output, he wrote "Thurber laid the Foundation for his voluminous correspondence during his Formative Years. In those years he wrote to many distinguished persons, none of whom ever replied."

> I have been unable to find any one of Thurber's many correspondents who saved any of his letters. "We threw them out when we moved," people would tell me. Thurber gradually became aware of this on his return to America (the Final Phase) because of the embarrassed silence that always greeted him when he would say "Why don't we get out my letters to you and read them aloud?"

Thurber was born in 1894 into a mildly eccentric family. His comic talent must have been inherited from his mother, who once appeared before her father's prim guests in a nightgown to announce that she had been held in the attic because of her love for Mr. Briscoe, the postman. Her own mother

1 *The Thurber Letters: The Wit, Wisdom, and Surprising Life of James Thurber*, Harrison Kinney, editor; Simon & Schuster, 798 pages, $40.

Thurber Country: A Collection of Pieces About Males and Females, Mainly of Our Own Species, by James Thurber; Simon & Schuster, 276 pages, $25.

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thought that electricity dripped invisibly into the house from empty sockets—but then that's what most trial lawyers believe today.

When he was seven Thurber lost an eye, and the accident left him a shy and retiring child. He could not play at games, and his weak eyesight in the remaining eye interfered with his studies. He could not see through a microscope to pass the mandatory biology course and left college without a degree. Taken on by the American Embassy in Paris, he began his diplomatic career in Thurberesque fashion. Colonel House had wired that he wanted a dozen code books, but, as code books were lacking, the message was garbled and Thurber was one of a dozen code clerks sent in response. He stayed there for more than a year, and then tried journalism.

We should perhaps never have heard of Thurber but for his chance meeting in 1927 with Harold Ross, the editor of a new humor magazine called *The New Yorker*. Ross was looking for a managing editor and had just interviewed a score of people. They all had told him they were writers. Ross asked Thurber what he did. "I'm a newspaperman," he answered; and he got the job.

Editing *The New Yorker* taught Thurber the economy of style which became his trademark. He was a great admirer of something F. Scott Fitzgerald once told Tom Wolfe. "You're a putter-in," Fitzgerald told the long-winded Wolfe. "I'm a taker-out." Thurber took the lesson even further: He became a short-story writer, not a novelist. Everything he wrote seemed naturally to end after 8,000 words.

Thurber's other great teacher was E. B. White. He once told White that had White teamed up with G. B. Shaw the country would have had the E.B.G.B's. And "it would have been a good thing for us." With White he co-authored his first book, *Is Sex Necessary?*, a spoof on the self-help books that began to appear in the 1920s. The book also launched Thurber as a cartoonist. Before then nobody took his doodling seriously. Thurber's most famous cartoon was rejected by *The New Yorker* when he first submitted it. A man in bed looks about, scratching his head. His wife tells him, "All right, Have it Your Way—You Heard a Seal Bark!" Behind the bedstead a seal smiles unconcernedly past them. The art director complained that seal whiskers didn't look like that. "That's how a Thurber seal's whiskers look," said White.

Thurber's spare style made him a better humorist. We laugh better when we do not try to laugh all the time, and nothing is more fatal to humor than the compulsive punster's strident efforts to amuse continually. Thurber knew that the secret is taking-out, not putting in, and he took to heart Groucho Marx's advice to reduce the number of gags in *The Male Animal*.

Thurber's economical style and madcap sense of humor resembled that of Evelyn Waugh's early novels. Thurber admired Waugh, and the Walter Mittys and Paul Pennyfeathers were brothers under the skin. Both were removed from life, both asked for our kindness. "They expect so little of life," said Dorothy Parker. "They remember the old discouragements and await the new. They are not shrewd people, nor even bright, and we must be very patient with them." In the end both triumph, but not from anything they do. Instead, life rolls over them, sometimes pushing them down and sometimes, improbably, buoying them up.

Thurber saw himself in his characters, like Mr. Monroe in *The Owl in the Attic*. "He had a certain charm, yes; but not character. He evaded difficult situations; he had no talent for firm resolution; . . . and he wasn't even very good at renunciation, except when he was a little tired or a little sick." He also recognized his own ill-temper, particularly in the Battle between the Sexes. The Thurber male is a romantic daydreamer and a disorganized bumbler; the Thurber female is a condescending manipulator and a domineering monster of efficiency.

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Together they were Thurber and his first wife, Althea. In reviewing *Modern English Usage*, Thurber observed that the grammarian's strictures must always permit exceptions. To say that the split infinitive is always wrong "is a piece of the sentimental and outworn notion that it is always wrong to strike a lady."

We cannot laugh without that tiny drop of malice which turns the whole pail black. Thurber had malice in buckets. On a visit to Los Angeles he wrote, "It is 104 here today but the papers in this godawful hellhole proclaim 'Angelenos suffer no discomfort.' I hope the sons of bitches burn up." Sober during the day, at night he turned into "that tall, wild-eyed son of a bitch, with hair in his eyes, a glass in his hand, screaming and vilifying." He was particularly unpleasant to women. One day some lady tourists from Thurber's home town approached him for an autograph. Get lost, he told them. They persisted. "We've just been to the theater and it would be just so perfect if you would sign our napkins." Thurber picked up the telephone from the table and threw it through a glass wall. "Have I convinced you?," he asked. The women ran sobbing out of the Algonquin.

We are nicer than that now, and today's prissy *New Yorker* has little time for Thurber's malicious sense of humor. Brendan Gill complained that "Thurber was almost as thoroughly a product of the nineteenth century and its reprehensible preoccupation with horseplay as [Harold] Ross was. As far as I know, since Thurber's time no practical jokes have been played by anyone on the magazine." We should never have thought otherwise.

We may be nicer, but are we as funny? It takes a taste for the dark side to draw a woman snuggling up to a horrified man with "Have You Fordotten Our Ittle Suicide Pact?" Or a large woman leering at a nervous little man, "If you can keep a secret, I'll tell you how my husband died." More than anything, a sense of humor requires the self-awareness to pierce through our amour-propre and recognize the drop of malice in our own hearts. The Just hug themselves in self-delight, and, as they are just, permit themselves to hate the unjust; but like Fontenelle they never make "Ha, Ha."

The best humor, Thurber wrote, is "closest to that part of the familiar which is distressing, even tragic." He didn't want anyone to sugar-coat it. E. B. White recalled how angry he became when he heard someone say that humor is a shield, not a sword. "He wasn't going to have anyone beating his sword into a shield." Only once, when he lost his sight, did his nerve fail. He asked Mark Van Doren whether his blindness might be a punishment for his satires. He had always looked for flaws in people and never praised their strengths. Van Doren assured him that humor's message about the absence of goodness and intelligence in the world is a valuable one.

Thurber caught on because he showed readers how America had changed. The nineteenth-century humor of tall tales and Mark Twain was the humor of the frontier. A frontier society is a male society, and by Thurber's time America had become urbanized and a good deal more feminized. Like *Bringing Up Father*, Thurber's battle of the sexes amused because the change was a source of tension for which laughter provided relief. "The American woman is my theme," he told Max Eastman, "and how she dominates the male." He thought America was a matriarchy. "It became obvious to me when I was a child that the American woman was in charge. . . . I think it's one of the weaknesses of America." Since Thurber's time we've changed again, and the battle of the sexes no longer seems a suitable subject for laughter—not, I suspect, because we're less feminized.

Thurber's satire was social, not political. He insisted upon a wall of separation between literature and politics, and for that reason loathed Joe McCarthy. He was not without his own political views. He was a registered Republican who liked Al Smith

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and Adlai Stevenson, but he thought politics was mostly a comic business and once berated Edward Murrow for ignoring the Bull Moose party. The world around him had turned serious and he hated it. Students who used to ask him what Dorothy Parker was really like began to ask how the Depression would affect literature. What drove him around the bend were the literary communists who wanted art to serve a political purpose. "You see . . . how the Marxist boys try to twist Man around to fit a Plan instead of making the plan fit Man." He didn't know much about Marxism, but the joyless communists told him everything he needed to know about their cause. One of the greatest menaces he saw was "people with intelligence deciding that the point is to become grimly gray and intense and unhappy and tiresome."

I am sorry that *Thurber Country* has omitted my favorite Thurber spoof, "If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox." The story was written for a series of fictitious, counterfactual histories, and permitted Thurber to show his southern sympathies while mocking the genre of alternative history. Lee appears at the Court House, dignified and magnificent in his uniform. Grant's jacket is unbuttoned and one boot is off. Through an alcoholic haze, he peers at his new visitor.

> "I know who you are," said Grant. "You're Robert Browning, the poet."
>
> "Shall we proceed at once to the matter in hand?" asked General Lee, his eyes disdainfully taking in the disordered room.
>
> "Oh sure, sure," said Grant. He took another drink. "All right," he said. "Here we go." Slowly, sadly, he unbuckled his sword. Then he handed it to the astonished Lee. "There you are, General," said Grant. "We dam' near licked you. If I'd been feeling better we *would* of licked you."

Happily, *Thurber Country* does include the epistolary "File and Forget," an account of Thurber's battles with his publishers. In the first letter Thurber tells the publishers that their letter to him at Hot Springs, AR was forwarded to Hot Springs, VA, where he visited a year ago, and from there to his house in Connecticut; and that he did not order thirty-six copies of *Grandma Was a Nudist*. The publishers responds with a contrite letter pleading a change in staff. They have fixed his address in their records, and they add that "It must be lovely this time of year in Virginia." Next comes a letter from a woman in Ohio where Thurber lived in 1907 offering to forward the thirty-six books to him. And so on, as error is compounded upon error, until Thurber receives seventy-two copies of the book and burns them in the middle of Highway 7.

The art of paragraphing, Thurber once said, was to make something that was ground out sound as if it was dashed off. He was a master at this, but his stories also had a structure and an ending and he derided *The New Yorker*'s minimalism. "We have invented, perfected, something that is neither a happy ending nor an unhappy ending. . . . We seem to find a high merit in leaving men on bases." When you finish a good short story, he wrote, you never want to ask, "So what happened then?"

For those who are agnostic about meaning, minimalism is the best you can do. But Thurber also lacked deep beliefs, and led a cocktail party life. A less frivolous person might have written sharper satire and given us a more profound critique of his time. Like Waugh he inferred a Fall from the evidence about him, but unlike Waugh did not hope for a Redemption. He and his friends shared a commonsense morality which protected them from modernism's dissolution of values. They lived off an inheritance which they squandered, but while they possessed it threw great parties. They had the gifts of friendship and of enmity, for they had the jester's belief that we are put on earth to entertain each other as well as his resentment when the offering of laughter is not reciprocated. They are part of the world we left behind.

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The best Good Book

Adam Nicolson God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible. HarperCollins, 281 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Paul Dean

Adam Nicolson has had the ill-luck—or the temerity—to write in the wake of two excellent books on his subject, both of which appeared in 2001: Benson Bobrick's *The Making of the English Bible* and Alister McGrath's *In the Beginning*. Little of what he tells us about the production process of the King James ("Authorized") Version of the Bible (1611) cannot be found, in more detail and better expressed, in those precursors. Too much of *God's Secretaries* is after-dinner history, written in a "style" which often gives pain. The compilers of the AV are described as "a generous slice of Jacobean England," serving a monarch whose vision of universal peace was "a fantasy too far" and who wished to "embrace a broad stretch of middle ground"—a truly eirenic ambition. One of the commission's leading members, Lancelot Andrewes, is credited with the ability to "slalom around the complexities of theological dispute." Nicolson's own expertise in this area (theology, not slaloming) may be judged by his reference to "the flat, overall illumination of Protestant ideology." Nor is his grasp of Jacobean court culture much stronger; he characterizes it as "drenched in the word rather than the image," forgetting the intensely spectacular nature of masques and other entertainments. How far from the truth, too (alas!), is his statement that the AV is a book with which "the English-speaking world has been familiar ever since" its publication. On the contrary: at least in Britain, few people under fifty are likely ever to have heard it read in churches, or to have read it themselves. Undergraduates might once have encountered it in a course on seventeenth-century prose; if any such courses survive, they probably exclude the AV, despite the fact that it was a key source for English literature for over three centuries, on the grounds that it is now too "inaccessible" to the students—and their teachers.

Faced with Nicolson's over-simplifications, banalities, crudities, and distortions, one might be tempted to lay the volume aside and pass on. But there is another, more impressive voice in his book. It comes out here, apropos the disastrousness of the New English Bible (1962), which T. S. Eliot rightly condemned for "its combination of the vulgar, the trivial, and the pedantic." Nicolson writes:

> This is about more than mere sonority or the beeswaxed heritage-appeal of antique vocabulary and grammar. The flattening of language is a flattening of meaning. Language which is not taut with a sense of its own significance, which is apologetic in its desire to be acceptable to a modern consciousness, language in other words which submits to its audience, rather than instructing, informing, moving, challenging and even entertaining them, is no longer a language which can carry the freight the Bible requires. It has, in short, lost all authority. . . . [The NEB] is a form of language which has died.

That is both true and pungently expressed. When Nicolson undertakes detailed verbal comparisons between the AV and its predecessors or successors, he leaves aside anecdotal padding and focuses a far sharper lens.

The tight social network from which the translators came is noteworthy. We have the names of fifty of them, of whom twenty-three had backgrounds at Cambridge and eighteen at Oxford—a predictable bias, given Cambridge's prominent role in the gestation of Protestantism, although anyone suspected of Puritan sympathies was excluded from the translation team. Many had known each other at school and university; those who rose to power provided places for their less fortunate fellows. Archbishop Bancroft of Canterbury issued them with a set of instructions which reflect the King's requirements for the translation:

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the Bishops' Bible of 1568 was to be followed as much as possible, with traditional technical terms kept and not translated so as to favor Separatists (e.g. "church" not "congregation"). There were to be no marginal glosses, as in the Geneva Bible which James detested because of its popularity among Puritans, but only cross-references, and in cases of multiple meaning "that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by most of the ancient Fathers." Each individual's work was subject to rigorous cross-checking, to eliminate all risk of undue idiosyncrasy. From this derives what Nicolson describes as the AV's conformity "both to Protestant and to pre-Protestant ideas about the nature of Christianity." It is in some sense still a Catholic bible; for all its successors, the Reformation has happened, the past is over and gone.

Few other contemporary documents dealing with the translation have survived; the Privy Council records between 1600 and 1613, which might have been informative, were destroyed in a fire. One set of minutes of the discussions has been fortuitously preserved. Its author was John Bois, who had worked on the Apocrypha. He took notes—in Latin ironically—at the final revision stage. The procedure was instructive: the proposed English version was read aloud, committee members following the text in polyglot Bibles, interrupting the reader only to raise objections. "The ear," Nicolson observes, "is the governing organ of this prose; if it sounds right, it is right." It was intended to be read aloud in churches, and its cadences were shaped accordingly. In *Hebrews* 13.18, for instance, Jesus is described as "the same yesterday, and today, and for ever." In committee, Andrew Downes, Professor of Greek at Cambridge, proposed that this be altered to "yesterday, and today the same, and for ever" on the grounds that "the statement will be more majestic." Perhaps, but it would not come so easily off the tongue, and his suggestion was rejected. If majesty is indeed the quality which most people feel the AV possesses above all, this is partly due to its combination, at its best, of simplicity and sonority.

Yet this was also a consciously archaic English, adopting much from earlier versions, especially that of Tyndale (tactfully unacknowledged in view of his radicalism), and written with an eye to the original languages: "it is not the English you would have heard on the street, then or ever," Nicolson says. (Nor, incidentally, is Shakespeare's; reading his plays alongside those of his contemporaries, I often wonder how much a theater audience would *really* have understood. Only Jonson is harder—and Jonson's plays were notorious box-office failures.) The Revised Version (1885) introduced words such as "peradventure" or "aforetime" in a bid to make the AV more "authentically" Jacobean, in the manner of architectural "improvement." The main reason why the NEB is such a mess is not that it was compiled by a committee, for that had worked perfectly well in 1611, but the delusion of its directors that a "timeless" English could be achieved. "Looking for reality," Nicolson well says, the NEB team "lost all feeling for the extraordinary and overpowering strangeness of the Bible." What could be less ordinary than the more blood-curdling stories of the Pentateuch, Jesus's miracles, or the Book of Revelation? But there is more to the point than that. The only "timeless" language there has ever been is Esperanto. Language belongs perforce to a time and place, a socio-cultural context, a framework of assumptions about the world. Nicolson can cast a sudden shaft of light on such connexions. St. John has Peter, after his denial of Jesus, admitted to a place by the fireside among the high priest's servants: "and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself." Did the translators reflect on the shifting coteries of the Court, asks Nicolson, on the fate of Essex for instance, and balance shivering integrity against cosy compromise in their imaginations? Or did John Layfield, who had been to Puerto Rico and written a dazzled account of its wonders, remember what he had called the

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"green-good liking" of the trees of Dominica as he translated the description of the Garden of Eden?

The hankering of some modern Christians—generally the middle-aged and old—after the AV, and its companion jewel the Book of Common Prayer (1662), while understandable, is also in the strict sense of the word, pathetic. That world cannot come again; perhaps, as Nicolson implies, it was never really there anyway. If we are to have a Bible at all we must, one supposes, have a Bible for our world. The problem is that many of us no longer know what our world consists of or how to name it. It is the world of Babel rather than Pentecost, and for such a bewilderment of tongues there can be no translation.

A return to BEA

C. S. Nicholls
Elspeth Huxley: A Biography.
St. Martin's Press, 528 pages, $35

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Possibly because the men were all outdoors shooting animals and clearing land, the best-known chroniclers of the romantic, improbable lives led by white settlers in British East Africa have been women: Isak Dinesen, Beryl Markham, and Elspeth Huxley. Dinesen's *Out of Africa* is, considered in purely literary terms, the best book on the subject, but she was a self-mythologizer and, according to those who knew her and her world, essentially dishonest. Beryl Markham's autobiographical *West With the Night* has achieved a popularity out of all proportion to its merit: while Markham's life was thrilling by any standards, her prose is artificial and unconvincing, written in a sort of second-rate Hemingwayese.

Huxley (1907–1997) was less visionary and musical than Dinesen, less given to high lyricism than Markham, and more truthful than either. In forty-eight works of fiction and non-fiction—she was both a novelist and a political authority, one of the acknowledged experts on colonial and post-colonial policy—she explored Britain's African empire and its disintegration, of which she was an astute and passionately interested eyewitness. *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959), a charming novel based on her childhood memories of British East Africa (BEA) before the First World War, is a minor classic, giving a glimpse of Africa in its last, fleeting moment of primeval splendor and a matchless child's-eye view of the courage and folly of its white settlers. "One of the mild surprises of advancing age," she reflected, truly, "is to discover that part of one's lifetime has turned into history, a process which one generally assumes has come to a halt about the time that one was born."

Huxley's biography—a life that encompassed the entire history of Kenya Colony as well as substantial portions of its pre- and post-colonial story—has now been written by C. S. Nicholls, herself a white Kenyan. It makes for interesting if rather dry reading, no match for Huxley's own clear, colorful prose which has fixed indelible images in many a reader's imagination. Unfortunately for Ms. Nicholls, Huxley inherited the stoic ethos and stiff upper lip of her caste, which considered displays of feeling to be unbecoming. She habitually suppressed her deeper emotions; the only feeling she allowed herself to show was irritation. This masked her inner life and has made her an opaque and elusive biographical subject. "As for soul-baring, I'm bad at it," she admitted.

I myself lived in the one-time so-called "White Highlands," on and off, between 1973 and 1989. When I first began visiting Kenya, early in the 1970s, the settler society described by Huxley still existed in a recognizable if watered-down form, but by the end of my visits there it had all but disappeared. The spread of the telephone throughout the 1970s, and the television set a decade later, dragged the white community out of its anachronistic and cheerfully self-imposed isolation. On another

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level, a certain self-consciousness set in with the international propagation and, ultimately, the marketing of anything that could be labeled "colonial" or "Raj." Ralph Lauren's clothing designs, evoking a fevered fantasy of deluxe safaris led, perhaps, by Bror von Blixen for the benefit of Teddy Roosevelt, were one manifestation of this trend. Another was the popularity of the bogus *Out of Africa* film with its improbable fashions: Meryl Streep braving the red African dust in frivolous white linen. (Real memsahibs of Isak Dinesen's generation dressed, according to Huxley, rather differently, in "hideous clothing which was far too hot and bulky for the climate. This consisted of ill-fitting gabardine breeches, partly concealed by short, wide, flapping khaki skirts, and a khaki coat and boots.") The final Disneyfication of Kenya—the moment it became clear that whatever might be left of the "real thing" had ceased to be real—occurred a couple of years ago, when an entire issue of *Architectural Digest* was dubbed "The Kenya Issue" and devoted to glossy houses, many owned by the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of original settlers, worked over by architects and designers and decked out with African art. A far cry from the pre-World War I sitting rooms described by Huxley, with green velvet sofas and even pianos incongruously standing in whitewashed rondavels, on floors of puddled clay.

That the recent apotheosis of this "settler chic" has occurred in the midst of politically correct anti-colonialism has been possible, of course, because the erstwhile white masters lost their sting along with their power. As Huxley observed in the years following Kenyan independence, "The colonist hyena [is] emerging from the shadows into which the comrades drove him in the bad old imperialist days. Now that western imperialism (though certainly not other forms) has receded into history, the white colonist can be seen not only with his manifest failings, but with virtues it is no longer blasphemous to recognize." And, "far from being black-hearted villains, [the white settlers] are becoming nostalgic old things deserving of affection rather than abuse, like steam railway locomotives."

Huxley's parents, Josceline (Jos) and Nellie Grant, arrived in Africa in 1912. Both from grand families—Nellie, née Grosvenor, was a cousin of the Duke of Westminster, while Jos was descended from a governor of Bombay—they had little money of their own and, impractical optimists, saw a glowing future in Africa's fertile White Highlands. Upon their arrival in Nairobi Jos purchased five hundred acres of virgin bushland, suitable, he was told, for growing coffee, some fifty miles up-country near the little outpost of Thika. Thither the couple repaired, accompanied by oxcarts loaded down with eccentric impedimenta that included an Escoffier cookery book and a dressmaker's dummy.

It is hard, confronted as we are each day with pictures of an Africa being torn apart by guns, drugs, and internationally financed warlords, to realize how isolated the interior still was only a century ago. At night, local Kikuyu warriors edged nervously up to the Grants' camp, attracted by the apparent magic of a safari lamp. "They were like bronze statues endowed with life and moved tautly, as if on springs, ready to bound forward or back. One felt that just as they vanished into the void like antelopes when alarmed, they might spring forward when angered and thrust with spears; they were triggered men." Huxley's work is imbued with a feeling of loss as "progress" destroys this world, running through Africa "at breakneck speed . . . an elemental force, like wind or sun or lightning, that doles out good and evil more or less impartially."

Elspeth sailed out to join her parents at the age of six; her memories of these early, pioneering days, with whites and Africans living parallel and mutually incomprehensible lives that intersected only on certain levels, are rendered in exquisite prose in *The Flame Trees of Thika* and its sequel, *On the Edge of the Rift*. Jos, a dreaming Micawber, and Nellie, a brilliantly entertaining woman of high energy but not, perhaps, very prac-

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tical, make wonderful characters in Huxley's fictionalized memoirs but must have been infuriating parents; everything they touched failed, and Huxley had to provide financial help from the moment she was old enough to earn a living.

Huxley remained obsessively fixed on Africa throughout her writing life, but as an adult she never deviated from her decision to live elsewhere. After studying agriculture at Reading University and, for one year, at Cornell in the United States, she settled in England. At the age of twenty-four she married Gervas Huxley, a businessman and the cousin of Aldous and Julian Huxley. Like her mother before her, she was the dominant partner in her marriage; Gervas was a gentle, diffident man. But as in many such cases he seems to have served as a protective buffer between his wife and her somewhat abrasive mother. "Nellie and Elspeth," one friend recalled, "both powerful women, argued and fought all day long, comments like how dare you say that, give reason for your theory, voices rose as more gin poured in." (They quite enjoyed their clashes, however, and in 1980 Elspeth collected her beloved mother's letters and published them, with great success, as *Nellie: Letters from Africa*.)

Huxley's first book was *White Man's Country* (1935), a two-volume biography of Lord Delamere and in effect a history of the settler movement of which he was the political leader. Her sympathies, at this point, lay with her own people, the settlers; but they were to change over time, and though she never demonized the imperialists, by the 1950s she had come to believe that independence was not only inevitable but necessary. "Of course it's hard on individuals," she wrote, thinking of her many friends who lost their farms—their life's work and only capital—in the forced land sales of the new nation. "Of course it has its personal tragedies. No man on earth can stop these great waves of history from sweeping away good and bad together. They not only can't be stopped, they shouldn't be. It's right, you know, it's right that people should be free." This in spite of the fact that she disliked and mistrusted Jomo Kenyatta, and knew that the new African rulers would probably not turn out particularly well: "human beings," she wrote, "are the same whatever their colour and level of so-called civilization—that is to say, on balance, bloody."

Huxley's non-fiction has, of course, dated: Africa has moved on, with a rapidity that even she, canny though she was, could not have foreseen. Her novels, though, continue to charm, with their thoughtful vision of the traumatic and often absurd juxtaposition of African and European cultures. Her upbringing had made her keenly aware that while human nature does not much differ from one culture to another, ways of perceiving the world emphatically do. European ideas of ownership and land-tenure, large-scale agriculture, and other innovations must have shaken the African worldview to its roots. The Kikuyu, as Huxley wrote in *The Flame Trees of Thika*,

> walked about their country without appearing to possess it—or perhaps I mean, without leaving any mark. To us, that was remarkable: they had not aspired to recreate or change or tame the country and to bring it under their control. . . . If water flowed down a valley they fetched what they wanted in a large hollow gourd; they did not push it into pipes or flumes, or harass it with pumps. Consequently when they left a piece of land and abandoned their huts (as eventually they always did, since they practiced shifting cultivation), the bush and vegetation grew up again and obliterated every trace of them, just as the sea at each high tide wipes out footprints and children's sandcastles, and leaves the beach once more smooth and glistening.

Huxley was a bit of an oddball, an artist and an intellectual (though she would have been too modest to describe herself as such) in a violently anti-intellectual culture. White Kenya, even when I knew it a couple of generations after Huxley's youth, was dis-

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proportionately populated by people who nowadays would be labeled as having ADD: action, of nearly any sort, was to them far preferable to reflection. Huxley gave these people clear voices with which to explore their lives and the colonial project itself. Here, for example, is a conversation between several characters from *The Flame Trees of Thika*: Robin and Tilly, based on Jos and Nellie; Lettice and Hereward Palmer, their neighbors; and Alec Wilson, a clerk from London who has taken up farming in Africa.

> "Whenever I look at a Kikuyu woman toiling up a hill with a baby and a load of produce on her back weighing about a hundred pounds, [says Lettice Palmer], I feel guilty."
>
> "How ridiculous!" Hereward exclaimed. "They are only natives. Do you expect to lower yourself to their level?"
>
> "I sincerely hope I shall never have to try."
>
> "Surely," Tilly put in, "the idea is that they should rise to ours."
>
> "Do you suppose," Lettice mused, "that one day they will become adept at water-colour sketches and German *Lieder*?"
>
> "It seems unlikely," Robin reflected, watching a procession of three women, bent under their loads. . . .
>
> "Surely that's the whole point of our being here," Tilly remarked. "We may have a sticky passage ourselves, but when we've knocked a bit of civilization into them, all this dirt and disease and superstition will go and they'll live like decent people for the first time in their history." Tilly looked quite flushed and excited when she said this, as if it was something dear to her heart.
>
> "That is not the whole point of *my* being here," Alec Wilson put in, during a pause that followed. "I didn't come to civilize anyone. I came to escape from the slavery one has at home if one doesn't inherit anything. I mean to make a fortune if I can. Then I shall go home and spend it. If that helps to civilize anyone I shall be delighted, but surprised."
>
> "Of course it will help indirectly," Tilly said.
>
> "They must have an example," Hereward agreed.
>
> "Do you think that we set an example?" Lettice inquired.

Nicholls's biography will please those who are already interested in Huxley, or in colonial Kenya, but it is no substitute for Huxley's own books, especially *The Flame Trees of Thika*, *On the Edge of the Rift*, and *Love Among the Daughters*, her semi-autobiographical trilogy. Her sound sense and intellect, combined with humor and a descriptive gift that at times rises to the poetic, leave readers with a rich vision of a life that, whether for better or worse, has disappeared forever.

Two visions of paradise

Mario Vargas Llosa
El Paraíso en la otra esquina.
Ediciones Alfaguara, 485 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Renee Winegarten

In Peru in the 1950s, when he was a student, Mario Vargas Llosa read Flora Tristan's self-revealing *Pérégrinations d'une paria* (1838), with its vivid and often scathing impressions of Peruvian society, a book that left a deep mark on him. As he told an interviewer from *Le Figaro Littéraire* in April 2003 who came to question him about his latest work of fiction, *El Paraíso en la otra esquina*, he may well have thought even then about writing a novel inspired by her tempestuous life. In his fascinating memoirs, *El pez en el agua* (1993), Vargas Llosa listed among his future literary projects in 1987 a novel about the half-French half-Peruvian socialist and feminist militant, who died in mid-task in 1844 at the age of forty-one. So it looks as if the subject of *El Paraíso en la otra esquina* has been maturing virtually throughout his literary life. It was only later, after beginning to write the novel about Flora Tristan, that he thought of including in the work the destiny of her equally extraordinary grandson, the painter Paul Gauguin.

Here was a literary project marked by the

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daring ambition that has distinguished the mature work of Vargas Llosa, an outstanding master of the narrative art. The year 2003 happens to be the centenary of Flora Tristan's birth in 1803 and Paul Gauguin's death in 1903. They never met: Flora died four years before her grandson's birth. In his *Avant et Après*, Gauguin, who was no mean writer, spoke of her at second hand as "quite a woman," and "a socialist bluestocking . . . who gave everything for the workers' cause." Apart from the blood tie, their only physical point of contact was the town of Arequipa, Vargas Llosa's birthplace. Thither in 1833 Flora boldly travelled from France, a woman alone, in a vain quest to recover her Peruvian inheritance; and there Paul lived with his widowed mother until he was six, an experience he could still recall in detail many years later.

Their true point of contact lay in the world of dreams, different as these were, translated into action. For Flora it was the emancipation of women and workers united in mutual help in order to build an ideal world of social justice—a peaceful revolution for which she sacrificed her own life as well as that of her children. For Paul it was the conviction that an innocent world untainted by corrupt civilization lay somewhere else, far off, over the horizon, in Martinique, in Tahiti, in the Marquesas, and that to live in this primitive, "savage" world was essential for the creation of a new kind of art. In pursuit of that dream he left his Danish wife and five children. The image of the novel's title—paradise around the corner—is taken from a children's game, a variety of blind man's buff, and there is something puerile as well as heroic in such utopian undertakings as those of Flora and her grandson.

The whole rich and subtle novel is rooted in the novelist's ambivalence toward the quest for utopia. Of Flora the political activist he writes that if things did not turn out well for her it was not for lack of effort, heroism, and idealism, but because in this life things never turn out as well as they do in dreams. It is a theme that he had already adumbrated in his fine novel *Historia de Mayta*, where a political idealist moves from moral indignation, revolt, dreams, "mystic generosity" to abortive revolutionary action. Yet while Vargas Llosa is a (disillusioned) admirer of Sartre and a onetime leftist sympathizer turned liberal-minded democrat and sensible pragmatist, he is also an artist with a debt to surrealism—and especially its humorous side—who feels that a life without dreams is a poor thing and that in art dreams are boundless and all embracing. There is no way of reconciling these opposites, the political and the aesthetic, except through his art.

The structure of his new novel takes the form of a kind of dual biography. It is based on careful research, like all Vargas Llosa's mature masterpieces: *La guerra del fin del mundo*, on the millenarian revolt in the back lands of Brazil toward the end of the nineteenth century, a book which transcends even its famous main source, Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertoes*, and the gut-wrenching *La Fiesta del Chivo*, which explores in fine detail the monstrous reign of the cruel Dominican dictator Trujillo and its lingering cost in damaged lives. His latest work of fiction concentrates upon Flora Tristan and Paul Gauguin as they move toward their end, with their flashbacks of memory that evoke the relationships, episodes, ideas, and feelings of earlier years. The protagonists are also linked by an omniscient narrator who occasionally addresses them with sympathetic familiarity as "Florita" and "Koke" (the Tahitian approximation of the name Gauguin), a formula that, although disconcerting, allows the author to encompass queries in a way denied to the biographer proper. The double story is told in chapters alternately devoted to Flora and Paul. This resembles the method Vargas Llosa adopted in his memoirs *El pez en el agua*, where a chapter of autobiography is followed by one that gives an account of his campaign to become president of Peru in 1990, his growth as a writer being balanced by his political adventure. In his novel, Flora's single-minded concern with socio-political

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action is balanced by Paul's single-minded concern with art.

Neither Flora nor Paul appears as a particularly attractive character and, as he probes them from within, the author does not attempt to spare their weaknesses. They are both ruthless and obsessive egoists, troubling figures of a variety that has always appealed to his imagination. On her adventurous voyage to Peru, Flora passes herself off as single, though she has a husband and children living in France, and she toys with the affections of the ship's captain who wishes to marry her. She uses him, as Paul uses the beautiful thirteen-year-old girls who figure in his paintings and whom he takes to his bed in the islands while he is being painfully destroyed by syphilis. On the one hand, there is Flora's near frigidity through the sufferings caused by a brutal husband, with a lesbian episode (amply documented); on the other, Paul's drive to sexual exploration including an erotic fascination with the *mahu*, the Polynesian hermaphrodite, tenderly portrayed.

It is only relatively recently, with the rise of modern feminism, that Flora Tristan has been recognized as an important literary and political figure. Offspring of an irregular union between a Frenchwoman and Don Mariano Tristán, scion of a powerful Peruvian family and friend of Bolívar, Flora as a child moved suddenly from ample comfort to near penury on her father's early death. Marriage at seventeen to her employer, André Chazal, proved a disaster. She fled the marital home and dared to fight him through the courts. Chazal shot her in the street and the bullet lodged permanently near her heart.

Virtually self-educated, she wrote several books in addition to the account of her Peruvian experiences that made her name. Life in Peru fostered not only her loathing of privilege, injustice, and bigotry but also her admiration for female empowerment embodied in ex-President Gamarra's wife, a forceful woman of action she encountered. Flora Tristan's works included a novel, *Méphis*, and more notably *Promenades dans Londres* (1840), an exposé of the appalling condition of prostitutes and the laboring poor she had witnessed when employed as a ladies' companion in the capital. Influenced by utopian socialists, Saint-Simonians, Fourierists, nonetheless she followed her own path. She travelled around France, although she was desperately ill, trying to win support for the ideas she expounded in *L'Union ouvrière*. Most of the intelligent women writers of the day believed that the cause of women would be promoted through the advent of socialism—sad error—but Flora was unique in taking her ideals into the cities, knocking her head against the wall of incomprehension and opposition. Vargas Llosa follows her to her early death in Bordeaux with admiration tinged with a certain exasperation that she often inspires.

The novelist brings Flora to life by a remarkable imaginative leap, but his love of painting leads him as an artist to empathize even more closely with Gauguin. Once Paul has discovered his destiny in art he abandons bourgeois domesticity and life as a stockbroker to venture into the unknown. Vargas Llosa had touched on this theme in *El hablador* where the middle-class half-Jew Saúl Zuratas mysteriously disappears into the Amazonian jungle to live with the primitive Machiguenga Indians as their "storyteller." By the time Gauguin reached Polynesia, however, so had civilization, and he was hard pressed to find any trace of native belief in ancient Maori gods and the cannibalism and savagery he was seeking. It is the painter's feverish urge to paint that imposes itself. He knows when he has produced a work of true mastery. He wants recognition yet does not care about opinion. Nothing can stand in his way to creative fulfilment—not indifference, rejection, isolation, terrible physical suffering, a lonely death. As with his grandmother, so with Gauguin: it is courage that dominates Vargas Llosa's brilliant novel—a tour de force that by some magisterial sleight-of-hand combines pain and frustrated idealism with the touching humanity that characterizes his writings.

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Literary leftovers

Alan M. Wald
Exiles from a Future Time:
The Forging of the
Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left.
University of North Carolina Press,
432 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Stephen Schwartz

Notwithstanding its presentation and publication by a leading academic press, this is a work of neither literary history nor criticism. Rather, it is a triumphalist manifesto of a tenured ideology—a peculiar variant of radical leftism somewhere between neo-Stalinism and something probably best described as post-Trotskyism.

Wald, a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, has assembled biographical sketches of a group of writers nearly all of whom remained loyal to the Communist Party, USA (CPUSA), through its worst period: that of the Great Purges, the betrayal of the Spanish Republic, the Hitler-Stalin Pact, and the purges and murders following the Second World War. That is, they were unredeemable Stalinists.

Most of them were also untalented hacks, although some, depressingly, began with talent and suffocated it in the service of Stalin's secret police, for which, after all, the CPUSA was a thin mask. They were swept off the horizon of American literary life more by their creative failure or self-immolation on the altar of the Party than by the general catastrophe of the Communist intellect worldwide, or by the familiar bugaboo of "McCarthyism." The few legitimate exceptions to this carnival of failure, discussed here without originality, were the black writers Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, none of whom remained faithful to Communism. In addition, we find included a few women writers grossly overpromoted by latter-day feminists, such as the mediocre Meridel LeSueur and the dull Tillie Olsen.

And finally, the book addresses a tiny number, such as the poets Horace Gregory and Stanley Burnshaw, who came to their senses and fled the Stalinist milieu. Muriel Rukeyser, a poet and translator more or less forgotten today, is probably the only example of one who remained basically faithful to the radical left while producing occasional works of value. In an oversight typical of the sloppy Wald, however, her fascinating work on early American history, *The Traces of Thomas Hariot* (1971), is never mentioned, nor is Richard Wright's invention of the term "black power." Wald clearly prefers reading about writers than reading their work.

It is impossible to imagine most of the names discussed here being recognized by the wider reading public today: Mike Gold, whose image, unknown to all but the most initiated, adorns the cover. Joseph Freeman, Don West, Genevieve Taggard, H. H. Lewis, Walt Carmon, Samuel Sillen, Norman MacLeod, Herman Spector, Sol Funaroff, Alfred Hayes, V. J. Jerome, A. B. Magil, and Sidney Finkelstein: their careers are known today only on campuses, or, more specifically, in academic departments where ideological functionaries like Wald, mainly known as the author of a prior dishonest volume, *The New York Intellectuals*, have established a set of principles. For them, affiliation with the Russian party-police and its "Popular Front" intrusion into American intellectual life rather than creative achievement makes a writer important. In this context, "experts" like Wald flourish.

The essential deception of this book is betrayed by its subtitle's reference to "the mid-twentieth-century literary left." According to Wald, this category includes V. J. Jerome or Sidney Finkelstein more than Mailer or Bellow or even Nelson Algren. In a passage that combines mendacity with silliness, Wald asserts that Alexander Trachtenberg, head of the CPUSA (and Moscow-subsidized) International Publishers, "discharged outstanding services to literature in the United States by publishing books . . . such as Myra Page's *Gathering Storm: A*

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Story of the Black Belt (1932), Mike Pell's *S. S. Utah* (1933), James Steele's (pseud. for Robert Cruden) *Conveyer* [*sic*] (1935), Ben Field's (pseud. for Moe Bragin) *The Cock's Funeral* (1937), Albert Maltz's *The Way Things Are and Other Stories* (1938), Richard Wright's *Bright and Morning Star* (1938), Meridel Le Sueur's *Salute to Spring* (1940), Beth McHenry and Frederick Meyers's [*sic*] *Home is the Sailor* (1948), and Lars Lawrence's (pseud. Philip Stevenson) *Old Father Antic* (1961)."

Can anybody really believe that the absence of these titles from the American literary canon—except for Wright's, which was a single short story issued as a pamphlet, not a book—reflects anything other than their nullity? Here again, one has the sense that Wald reads about writers rather than writing. Mike Pell's *S. S. Utah* is not a literary work at all; rather, it is a fictionalized account of a naval mutiny produced as a manual for agitational work by the clandestine maritime apparatus of the Communist International. Similarly, *Home is the Sailor* is a lightly-pseudonymized autobiography of Frederick N. "Blackie" Myers, an infamous Stalinist waterfront thug implicated in the murder of the Italian-American anarchist Carlo Tresca. The misspellings noted above are characteristic of this book, which shows numerous marks of sloppiness, including presenting Alexander Woollcott as "Wolcott" and the filmmaker Joris Ivens as "Jorge Ivens." But describing the volumes issued by International Publishers as major works of American culture is something other than sloppiness; it is a deliberate deceit that makes one wish professors could be charged with malpractice.

Wald's infelicities abound. Naturally, he is addicted to the standard academic cant when discussing such favorite politically-correct topics as women writers. Here is his commentary on Tillie Olsen and others like her:

> The fragmented consciousness evidenced in Olsen's *Yonnondio* . . . certainly yokes the novel to modernist and postmodernist language experiments that contemporary French feminist theorists valorize as crucial to liberation from phallocentric master narratives. . . . The ambivalences of this literary trend can be observed in the literary persona that has become the site for the most contested interpretations retrospectively inscribed, of the relation of female Marxist cultural workers to the organized Left during the mid-twentieth century; this persona was produced by the writing of Meridel Le Sueur.

Such gibberish appears almost satirical; that it is emitted by a professor of English is dismaying, to say the least.

Wald is clearly possessed of a tin ear. He cites the early "proletarian" work of Burnshaw, concluding with the leaden lines,

> Tell our numberless scattered millions
> In mill and farm and sweatshop
> Straining with arms for rebellion,
> Tie up our forces together
> To salvage our earth from despair
> And make it fit for the living.

About these pedestrian lines, Wald enthuses, "Rarely has the moral and political case for Communist solidarity been expressed so cleanly and eloquently." This ridiculous comment reflects not only critical incompetence, but also simple ignorance. The ex-Communist Kenneth Rexroth and the anti-Stalinist Kenneth Patchen, both of whom receive short shrift from Wald, wrote much finer verse on Communist and revolutionary themes. So did numerous writers in other languages, such as the Peruvian César Vallejo or the Hungarian József Attila, of whom Wald, dazzled by the "Popular Front" of Earl Browder, seems to know nothing.

Above all, Wald's most obnoxious failings are moral. Although he still seems to imagine that his rehabilitation of Stalinism and its prostitutes is consistent with his discreet romance with Trotskyism (mentioned here only in the acknowledgments), he endeavors to forget, and to make his students

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and readers forget, the meaning of totalitarianism. He quotes with apparent approval the "folk" music impersonator Lee Hays, who said that Horace Gregory should "sell the *Daily Worker* on the subway for a year;" Hays was not worth a single hair of Gregory's eyebrow, as a creative personality or as a man. Further, Hays declared, "I sometimes wish Uncle Mike Gold would rise and slay these demons." When these bombastic threats were issued, "Uncle" Joe Stalin was literally slaying the "demons" in Russian literature, including such geniuses as Boris Pilnyak, Isaac Babel, and Osip Mandelshtam. No normal observer could overlook the very great probability that Hays's brutal idiom was intended to be followed by even more brutal results, once Hays and his comrades attained power in America.

Wald, however, finds it easy to overlook these issues, hypnotized as he is by commissars such as V. J. Jerome, the author of party-line manuals with titles like *Grasp the Weapon of Culture!* He mournfully notes, "Jerome seemed to become more mechanical rather than subtler over time." Considering that Jerome earned his living as a flunky of the international Stalinist apparatus, can this be surprising? Wald passes over without comment an anecdote entirely characteristic of those circles. Sidney Finkelstein, the author of equally artificial works of "criticism," such as *How Music Expresses Ideas*, complained to Jerome that while his own work was ignored by the CPUSA's official "theoretical organ," *Political Affairs*, "every time you [Jerome] write a pamphlet, you make sure it gets the most immediate and widespread attention." Of course, the power granted by the Russian police to its servants worldwide had its perquisites, which, in Moscow, included the power of life and death over one's rivals. Again, Wald ignores the echoes of Stalinist savagery in the degenerate discourse of the American Communists.

Finally, however, Wald's intent is transparent. His title, *Exiles from a Future Time*, is borrowed from the interesting but short-lived poet Funaroff. Unfortunately for Wald, the reality anticipated in the title is the present, in which he has gained great influence. He closes this book with a citation from the forgotten essayist Joseph Freeman, who in a 1959 letter hailed the youthful audience at a Columbia University symposium on the 1930s. Freeman wrote, "there is a new generation . . . who [has] picked up the old dream and will soon find new ways to carry it forward."

Lost in the narcissism of his academic position, Wald cannot admit that the "dream" revived in the 1960s has ended in an ignominy no less profound than that in which the Communist hacks found themselves a generation before. Alan Wald refuses to awake from history's nightmare and seeks to use it to draw others into a state of intellectual sleepwalking. But we who are alive and awake must be glad to realize that we will never suffer the future dictatorship to which the original doubtless referred, and for which tenured totalitarians like Wald are so nostalgic.

Settling the score

Michael Mewshaw
Do I Owe You Something?
A Memoir of the Literary Life.
Louisiana State University Press,
226 pages, $29.95

reviewed by David R. Slavitt

If you are a pipe-fitter, you hang out with other pipe-fitters, and this is true of writers, too. Writers may not be the most interesting people in the world—I hate movies where we watch characters type!—but they are likely to say witty things on occasion, and, because the stints at the desk can be so draining and arduous, these tend to be short, which leaves literary people free time in the afternoons and evenings to shop, cook, or keep each other company. Graham Greene, one of the many luminaries with whom Mike Mewshaw has crossed paths,

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punched his ticket by doing a hundred words a day, which doesn't seem like a lot but which, if you keep at it, will make a pile of pages and eventually a book. It had once been five hundred words a day, but then Greene cut that down to three hundred, and then one hundred, "just to keep my hand in."

That is the sort of valuable nugget that *Do I Owe You Something?* provides in abundance. For that, alone, the book is worth reading. But there is also bitching, which is what writers spend a lot of their free time doing. Much of it turns out to be justifiable. Mewshaw recounts, for instance, how he got treated shabbily—and dishonestly—by William Shawn at *The New Yorker*. Mewshaw had written a piece about Greene for *Playboy* which turned it down and paid a three hundred dollar kill fee. He collected "a fat sheaf of rejection slips," from *The New Yorker* among others, then placed the article in 1977 in *The Nation* for seventy dollars and in *London Magazine* for thirty pounds. In 1979, *The New Yorker* published Penelope Gilliatt's piece about Greene, much of which was lifted nearly verbatim from Mewshaw. Elizabeth Pochoda at *The Nation* was unwilling to ruffle *The New Yorker*'s feathers, so Mewshaw consulted a lawyer, who suggested that he send Shawn a list of parallel passages "and trust him to do the honorable thing." What Mewshaw wanted was an acknowledgment that the magazine had used his material, and whatever they normally paid for a profile. Shawn offered a thousand dollars but was afraid that Ms. Gilliatt was in a precarious state and could not stand another humiliation. If Mewshaw would forgo the acknowledgment, he'd go up to two thousand, and he offered his personal apology.

What he didn't offer was the information that there had been another claim against the magazine over this same profile—Ms. Gilliatt had also ripped off Judith Adamson's article about Greene in *Sound and Light*. And what Mewshaw learned later, from Renata Adler's memoir *Gone: The Last Days of the New Yorker*, was that a factchecker had found the parallels to his article in *The Nation* and had called them to Shawn's attention. So it wasn't "unconscious plagiarism," as Shawn had claimed, but theft, for which there ought to have been punitive damages.

There are other villains—Lewis Lapham at *Harper's*, for one, who assigns a piece on Italy, accepts it, has it set in galleys, and then changes his mind. He asks Mewshaw to cut it in half and take a thousand dollars rather than the originally promised three. Mewshaw agrees and makes the cuts. Then Aldo Moro gets kidnapped and shot. Lapham has held the piece and now wants further rewrites, including a discussion of the Moro incident. Mewshaw asks for an additional payment, but "*Harper's* dismissed this idea and me with a brusqueness that indicated no desire for further communication." The Random House editor Albert Erskine turns out to be a tepid friend (but then he was a publisher). Mailer is . . . Mailer, which is to say, "a prisoner, not of sex, but of a fictional character he had permitted to body-snatch him."

There are heroes, too. Mewshaw's experiences with George Garrett, Gore Vidal, James Jones, and Robert Penn Warren have all been entertaining, mostly amiable, and lively. Those friends of his whom I've known myself come across in these pages as recognizable in large ways and small. (I have never been able to pick up a check, either, in Vidal's company.) Generosity and decency are always worth celebrating, and this is especially true in the lit. biz. Most of the time, though, writers fall into a middle ground in which the virtues and vices of ordinary life are mixed, although perhaps exaggerated by the stresses of publication and publicity. Even when Mewshaw is recounting quirks and foibles, there is a note of charity without which these accounts would be painful. Anthony Burgess seems to have been at the very least distracted when, quite unwittingly, he provided the collection's title. Mewshaw is at the Cannes Film Festival and Burgess is on offer in connection

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with Stanley Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*. Burgess had blurbed Mewshaw's novel *Walking Slow*, and Mewshaw goes to the press conference to introduce himself and thank him. "At the mention of my name and novel, a dim flicker of recognition focused his close-set eyes. 'Why, yes, what a pleasure to meet you.' He shook my hand. 'Refresh my memory. Do I owe you something? A letter? A recommendation? Money?'"

Mewshaw has been around. He is a mid-list author, competent, sometimes better than that, but trying to survive in an adverse ecology in which he sometimes makes a few dollars in journalism. The sad fact is that the magazine business is in almost as bad shape as book publishing. That parts of this book have appeared in *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, *Texas Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *Granta* amounts to a terrible indictment of what used to be called the "slicks."

The fact that Mewshaw is a fringe character probably enhances his value as an observer. That this position is slightly awkward is not lost on him. He gives us almost a found poem in his report about a meal in Rome at Passetto's with Vidal who notices on the way out that the hat-check girl is reading a bodice-ripper romance in English and tells her, "You shouldn't be reading that drivel."

> She asks, "What do you recommend?" Vidal says, "You should be reading . . . him." He flings an arm in Mewshaw's direction. The hat-check girl asks who he is. "He's a famous American novelist. He's in Rome to see one of his novel's being made into a movie."
>
> As Gore stalks out, the girl asks, "Who are you?"
>
> In retrospect I realize that I should have said, "Gore Vidal." Instead, I murmured, "Nobody you'd know," and hurried out with Howard [Austen, Gore's companion of many years].
>
> Gore had a head start, and we didn't catch up to him until he was on Via Argentina, stabbing his key at a door and swearing, "It's broken. It won't work."
>
> Baffled, Gore glanced from the key to the lock and back again. Like a man trapped in a bad dream, he appeared to have lost track of where he was and where he belonged.
>
> "We live in the next building," Howard said.

Mewshaw reports that Greene once said to him: "Failure often has far more influence on a writer than success, travel, or exotic experience. The truth is most of us fall short in our work and in our lives." What Mewshaw tells students and aspiring writers strikes me as relevant, too. He invites them to look around at writers. "If they wanted to be pro football players, I would urge them to visit an NFL locker room and take stock of what they see. Well, much like football players, most writers get their teeth knocked out or their knees shattered and limp around with strange twitches and sad stories."

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Notebook

The victory of Posidippus

by James Gardner

In 1992 a mummy of suitably mysterious, not to say suspicious, provenance was brought to the attention of several classicists at the University of Milan. The chest-covering of the mummy, who has since disappeared, was made of papier-mâché formed from discarded papyrus, the ancient equivalent of old newsprint. As the scholars carefully retrieved and examined this papyrus, which is extant, they were astounded to find that it contained nearly an entire book of short epigrammatic poems by Posidippus of Pella (the attribution is almost universally accepted), a native of Macedon who lived in Alexandria around 270 BC.

Now the sands of Egypt have not been especially kind of late to the Muses of Greece. Early in the last century, they could be counted on to yield a fairly regular harvest of half a dithyramb of Pindar, a scene from Sophocles, a mime by Herodas. But in the past forty years, they have proved far less forthcoming, which is why the announcement of the discovery of 112 new poems by Posidippus has generated great excitement among students of classical poetry. The find was even featured, last November, on the front page of the science and archeology section of *The New York Times*, in which it was referred to as "the most significant discovery of Greek poetry in decades."

The Greek word "epigramma" means "inscription." In the present connection, it refers to a small poem on metal or stone, as opposed to papyrus or some comparable medium. By the Alexandrian Age, when Posidippus flourished in the courts of Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Arsinoe II, the epigram had become a kind of sport or elevated pastime, in stature somewhere between a sonnet and a limerick. All Alexandrian poets, in the words of Auguste Couat, "wrote epigrams; some of them wrote nothing else." Posidippus was one of those who, as far as we know, wrote nothing else. It is a vexed question whether the inscriptional function was still vigorous in Posidippus or had become a purely poetic convention. What cannot be denied is that, thematically, it remains an essential element of these poems. Most, if not all, of the epigrams in the Milan Papyrus claim to be the published versions of words originally carved into gemstones, tombstones, altars, or statues offered to the gods.

Before the age of modern archaeology and the revelations of papyrus, we knew of twenty-four poems attributed to Posidippus, of which twenty were in the Greek Anthology and four more in Athenaeus, a writer of the third century AD. To these poems, in more recent years, were added six substantial fragments, mostly on papyrus. With the discovery of the Milan Papyrus, however, we now have an additional 112 poems, of which about 95 are mostly intact, and all are in elegaic distichs.

Two editions of the new poems have already appeared. The *editio princeps* was published in 2001 by G. Bastianini and C.

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Gallazzi with help from C. Austin of the University of Cambridge and included an introduction and translations in Italian. Costing nearly $300, however, it is almost prohibitively expensive except for university libraries. But on the basis of twenty pages reproduced on the internet, I find the introduction to be very good and the notes, in Latin, extensive and usually illuminating.

To fill the demand for an inexpensive edition, a new version has now appeared from LED Edizioni Universitarie, *Posidippi Pellaei Quae Supersunt Omnia*, at a much more manageable 18 euros, roughly $20.[1] This useful volume, edited by Austin and Bastianini, contains not only the new poems but all the ones that were already known from the Greek Anthology, Athenaeus, and previous archeological remains. It is furnished with workman-like line translations in English and Italian (which are not always in agreement) as well as notes in Latin (though not always the best: "unius soli distichi"). What is baffling about the notes is that, although quite pertinent as far as they go, they are extremely sporadic, and one seeks in vain for any guiding principle for their inclusion. More lamentable still in an edition largely intended for a wider audience, the Latin preface gives absolutely no information about the extraordinary circumstances of the poem's discovery nor any background information about Posidippus himself.

But to understand how these new poems change our sense of the poet, consider Gilbert Highet's description of Posidippus in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1970). "His chief theme," Highet wrote, "is sex treated with brisk, ironic realism." This is no longer tenable. In upwards of a hundred poems there is hardly a breath of such things. (Granted, one previously known poem in the Greek Anthology, having to do with two prostitutes and a whip, requires some explaining, though it may be the work of Posidippus' friend Asclepiades.) Rather we seem to get everything else: poems about gemstones, statues, offerings to the gods, portents, shipwrecks, and victories in horse-races.

A good sense of Posidippus' art, of his pure linguistic competence, is contained in the four final lines of the following poem, one of several dealing with birds of omen:

> Let the bird that dwells with cows [C. Austin translates "wagtail"] appear as a delight to farmers, a good hunter even amid plants. But as for us, who mean to ply the Egyptian sea, may we be guided by the Thracian crane that flies beside our forestays and is a welcome sign to pilots, as it looks down upon the great waves while gliding safely through the fields of air.

As with all good poetry, but especially with epigrammatic poetry in Greek and Latin, everything depends on the order and rhythm of the words. And yet, even in my frankly prosaic translation, I think one can appreciate something of the imagistic concision of the poem, the depreciative contrast between the earth-bound farmer and the "we" who explore the wide world with a freedom so aptly captured by the majestic image of the Thracian crane, airborne above the surf.

The same skill and quiet grandeur are evident in the longest and most autobiographical of Posidippus' surviving poems, discovered on an excavated tablet at the end of the nineteenth century:

> If, Muses of my city, your chaste ears have heard something good either from Phoebus of the golden lyre in the glades of snowy Parnassus, or on Olympus, while you initiate the triennial rites of Bacchus, now free Posidippus from the burden of old age.

Like most of the epigrammatic poets of the Alexandrian age, Posidippus expresses at times an exquisite sadness at the passing away of beauty and youth. Consider this admirable opening to a poem quoted in Athenaeus:

1 *Posidippi Pellaei Quae Supersunt Omnia* is available at www.lededizioni.it/catalogo/austinposidippo.html.

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> Doricha, your bones have long since turned to dust, and the knot of your hair, and the shawl that gave off perfume, the one in which you once wrapped fair Charaxos when, standing close, your reached for the morning cups.

Of course, Posidippus displays many moods other than grandeur and sadness. There is the bejeweled preciosity of those descriptions of gemstones that open the newly discovered Milan Papyrus. He can also be superficial, even fawning in celebrating the equestrian victories of his royal patrons.

It is hard for contemporary readers to imagine the popularity once enjoyed by the sort of epigrammatic poetry in which Posidippus excelled, together with Callimachus, Hedylus, and Meleager among the Greeks and Catullus and Martial among the Romans. The Greek Anthology contains almost four thousand epigrams and Martial alone wrote over 1500. In the darkest days of the Dark Ages epigrams were still being written in Latin and Greek, and with the revival of learning in the Renaissance, down to the French Revolution, they were an obsession of the learned world, easily rivaling or surpassing the popularity of the sonnet in the vernacular.

But then the epigrammatic poem essentially disappeared, recurring spasmodically to be parodied as a superannuated tradition. The most famous example of this is surely the Death by Water section of Eliot's *Wasteland*, "Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead," an adroit send-up of the shipwreck epigram, six examples of which are included among the new poems of Posidippus.

The reasons for the epigram's demise are not hard to find. First there is the general decline of classical studies: though all poetry is embedded in its linguistic matrix as the soul is in the body, this connection is especially, vitally relevant to the epigrammatic poems of Greece and Rome. With such poems, everything is lost in translation. Dissevered from the sounds and syntax of the original, their thoughts seem consistently conventional and unimpressive. Allied to this is the fact that, with the ascendancy of lyric poetry over all other genres, starting in the early nineteenth century, the very attention and appetite necessary for appreciating such verse have vanished without a trace from most readers' response to literature. Nowadays, we ask of poetry that it provide unique language for unique sentiments. We find it largely intolerable that poetry might be formed from the expert deployment of conventional thoughts in conventional language. We rebel against that almost exhibitionistic fealty to an earlier tradition that is so essential a component of most poetry, indeed of most culture, before the French Revolution.

Nevertheless, such an appetite, such a response, must be acquired if one is to begin to appreciate the newly expanded achievement of Posidippus. No one can claim that he is a great poet. In his use of convention, he does not equal his great rival Callimachus, and his achievement, even if we had it whole, could not possibly match that of the Roman poets Catullus and Martial.

And yet, Posidippus is a true poet. There is something about the very typicality of his achievement which, properly understood, commands our respect. Of the eight hundred or so lines of his that we now have, it is difficult to find a single instance of a false step, an inartistic touch. Whereas most readers today judge poets by the degree to which they disrupt tradition, it was the hard-won victory of Posidippus, and of a handful of his contemporaries, fully to embody a tradition which, even within its limited terms, was beautiful and fine.

And then there is that slight but ineffaceable sense of the miraculous that always hovers about the discovery of a poem on papyrus. A voice has been restored to us, a real poetic intelligence rich in that sense of balance and music, of pathos and point, that was the great virtue, now almost universally disparaged, of the Alexandrian age. It rises up, this voice, through the fortuitous preservation of a few Nilotic reeds, and it lives.

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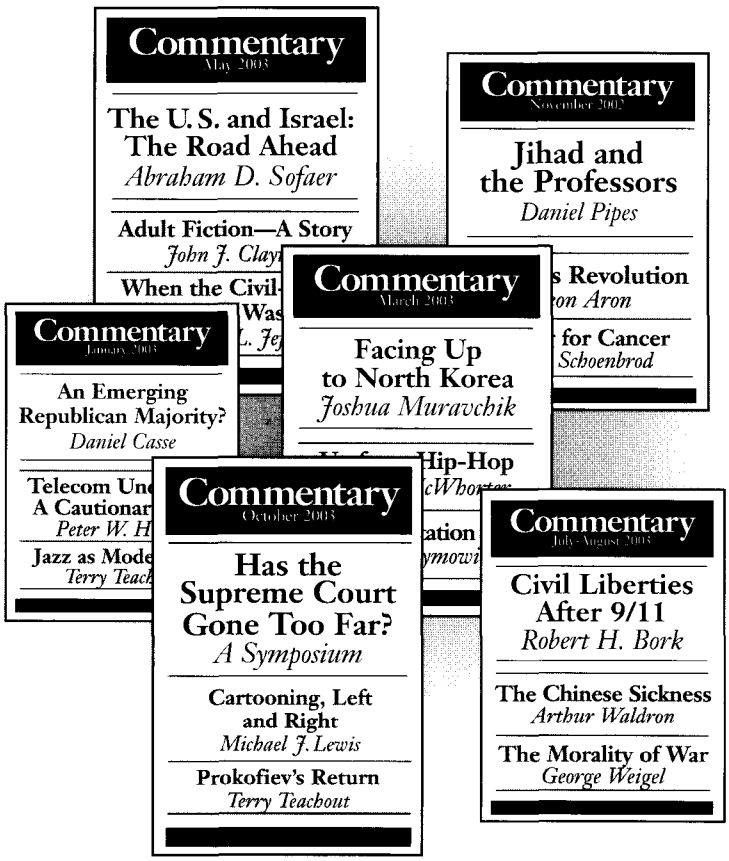

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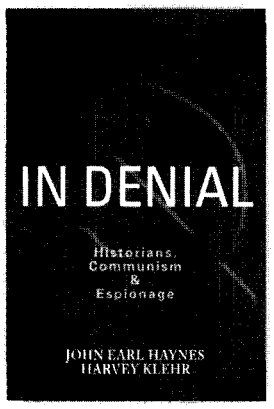

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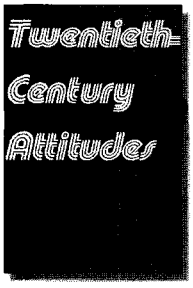

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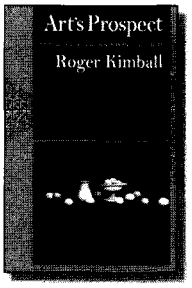

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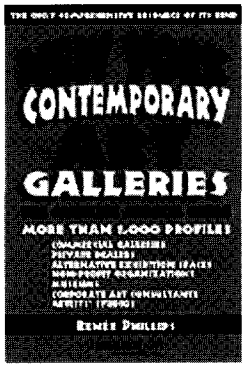

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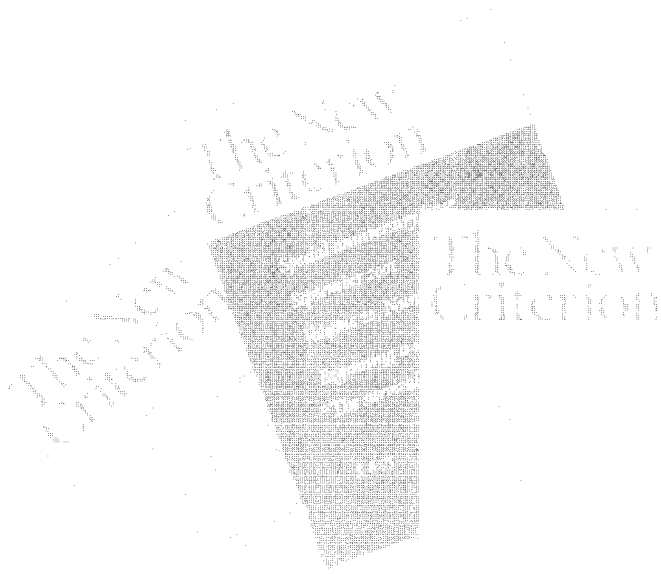

Our new address:

The New Criterion
900 Broadway
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New York, NY 10003

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1109 GEARY BLVD., SAN FRANCISCO CA 94109

Tel.: 415 292 6500 Fax: 415 292 6594 E-mail: order@art-books.com

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